

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

John The Baptist In Prison

Last week we asked the question: Was John mistaken about the Messiah he heralded to Israel? He was fiery and frightening. When Jesus began his ministry he was quite other: he announced good news, and he gathered a vast community of affliction, and cured them all. Now the story has gone further forward, Herod Antipas has had John silenced, because he criticised the king for stealing his brother's wife. So John's life is hanging by a thread in the dungeons beneath Herod's fortress in Caesarea. He must have felt very far from freedom, very far from the Reign of God which promised the fulness of joy to those persecuted in the cause of right.

“The Deeds Of The Messiah”

This is an astonishing phrase. You have to remember that no-one, at the point of today's Gospel, has used the word *Christ* (the Anointed One, the Messiah) of Jesus. Yet at this point in the story, Matthew suddenly says, *John in his prison had heard of the deeds of the Christ*. Now, quite independently of Jesus, there are deeds which it belongs to the Messiah to do; and John the Baptist had full knowledge of what they were. Prime among these deeds was the work of *judgment* - in the very sense of the Beatitudes: the Messiah is to come to judge the poor with equity, and to strike the complacent rich and the sinful oppressors of the poor with a rod of iron. Healing was not really a prominent theme of Messianic promise. So John sends his messengers to Jesus to ask *Are you the One who is coming?* Now, John has already born witness to Jesus at the time of his Baptism: *You come to me for baptism*, he says, *when it is I who need baptism from you*. On the other hand, John promised the people a figure who would come to judge them: one who would *thresh* them, gathering the wheat into his barn, and burning the chaff in a fire that would never go out.

What Isaiah Thought

In today's first reading we can hear some of the things Isaiah associates with the Day of the Lord: the blooming of the desert (the very place John the Baptist went and called others to go, to repent) will be accompanied by signs of healing: the opening of blind eyes, of deaf ears: the lame leaping, the dumb bursting into song, the returning home of exiled people, the ending of sorrow. It is here that

Jesus finds his answer for John: and he adds new miracles: the lepers are cleansed, the dead are raised to life: and most importantly, *the Good News is proclaimed to the poor*. What good news has Jesus proclaimed? He has announced the advent of the Reign of God, which is to be inaugurated by the One who is anointed by God, the bearer of the Holy Spirit. He has, in fact, proclaimed *himself* as the Messiah, as the One who is to come. This gives us, in the form we may well expect from this Galilean prophet, exactly what St John gives us in a far more direct and unmistakeable form: Jesus says, *I AM the way, the truth and the life: I AM the good shepherd; I AM the true bread of eternal life, I AM the resurrection*. These are the words John wants to hear in his prison, and Jesus sends them to him quite clearly, with that authority which marks him out to his hearers, and so eclipses the scribes of his day. Here is the only kind of judgment he will mete out, as he gathers the poor and heals them. But he has more to give John.

A Beatitude For John

All of those beautiful promises about the Reign of God are showered on Jesus' listeners at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus takes up the stance Moses took up on Sinai, and “fulfils” the Law Moses gave, with his deep call to holiness. Now he extends a special beatitude to John in his prison. *Blessed is the one who does not lose hope in me*. John can now do no more to herald “the One who is to come”. His rôle is that of the imprisoned martyr, who will bear witness with his blood in the darkness of the prison, while Salome's dance elicits drunken shouts from the guests at Herod's birthday party upstairs. Sometimes the evil in the world seems almost to submerge the promised Reign of God, and to take its treasure by main force. Then those who are awaiting the day of his coming will feel alone and abandoned, and must endure, sometimes quite alone, the apparent extinction of their hopes. *Blessed are you when people abuse and persecute you, and speak all kinds of evil against you because of me*. This Friday is the Winter Solstice, when the northern hemisphere will see the deepest darkness of the year. On Saturday the earth will begin to tilt backwards into the light. May our hearts and lives turn with it, into hope. *Fr Philip*