

Last week we listened to John the Baptist saying some fierce things about the oncoming Kingdom of God - how the One who is coming after me is greater than I am, that he will baptise you with fire; that his winnowing-hook is in his hand, and he is going to thresh you until you're separated into wheat and chaff; the wheat he will gather into his barn, and the chaff he will burn in a fire that will never go out. Things have moved on, and John is now in prison and afraid for his life. He sends out the messengers to ask: *Are you the One who is coming?* - surely implying that it is time for Jesus to start doing some threshing and some baptising with fire.

Jesus replies that the healing of the crowds and the proclamation of the Good News are the true signs of what he has come to do; and he even gives a special Beatitude to John: *Blessed is the man who does not lose faith in me!*

What would you ask of him, if Jesus of Nazareth stood before you at this very moment? I suppose that each of us has a personal idea of what Jesus should do for us. I think it is quite an important question. We should remember that whatever he did was in obedience to his Father: that's the meaning of what Isaiah says of the Messiah: *the fear of the Lord is his breath*, that is, he draws his life from his obedience to the Father. So behind the question, *what would you ask Jesus to do for you?* lies another question: *what do you think God the Father wants Jesus to do for you?*

There is a first principle: the one who made us wants us to live. Everything that increases and favours and deepens our life is what God wants for us. And in that sense, John the Baptist is quite safe in his prison, and Jesus is also at peace about him. John is soon going to die, but his death will be a faithful pouring out of his life, a gift of obedience to God and his truth. He is perfectly safe, because that is the path of salvation for all of us: to pour out our life in love and truth is the *only* thing that will make us safe.

Jesus too is on a path that will lead to his pouring out his life in truthful obedience to God; and this fidelity will have a direct bearing on all who imitate him. His gift will be that he will make sense of all who suffer like him and love like him. This is why John the Baptist is "sent before him to prepare his way"; Jesus holds the sacrifice of his own life already in his hands, and he is preparing to lay it down in love for all whom he is asked to heal and to enliven. By his dying John will belong to Jesus, and will receive a martyr's reward in the Kingdom Jesus is already inaugurating. That is why Jesus is so confident about John.

Maybe you can already show some signs of leaving the kingdom of this world behind. Maybe you have already become disqualified from the great race for reward in this world. If you have, take heart! You have the less to lose in the future. Maybe you have gone further, and taken some loving step that qualifies you to share in the kingdom that is coming: maybe you have made yourself willingly poorer, or firmly refused to be violent or vengeful. Maybe you have insisted on forgiving someone, and become a peacemaker. Maybe you have made yourself pure of the mucky world, so as to have a share in the sight of God's face. Maybe you have refused the easy way out the world offered, and carried the cross for someone else. If you have, you can rejoice and be glad, because your reward will be great in heaven. But this isn't a business of self-satisfaction, not a smug-fest. If it isn't hurting, be worried! As Thomas More said, *you can't go to heaven in a feather bed*. But the really cool saints have always had a touch of the martyr in them: when the Pope wrote to Clare of Assisi telling her to go easier on herself, she wrote back, *Holy Father, absolve me from my sins by all means. But don't absolve me from walking with Jesus the way of the Cross, or you will absolve me from heaven!*

So think a little deeper about what you would like Jesus to do for you. I want him to make the path that I am on clearer to me, so that I can accept it with courage, and with plenty of hope. I want to be sure that my path will be close to his. You have to become little to enter the Kingdom. So let us accept what humbles us and even what seems to defeat us, so that we can hope for our share in Jesus.