

Tidings of...?
3rd Sunday of Advent - December 12, 2010
Matthew 11:2-11; Isaiah 35:1-10

Don't know about you, but I think that sometimes, we may feel completely "out of synch" with the Christmas spirit. Instead of being a time of joy with family and friends, it can be a drag on the spirit and a drain on the emotions. Maybe it's a time of worries - like a job loss or being diagnosed with a serious illness. Possibly it brings up painful memories that have darkened Christmases past and still cast a shadow on the present. It may be a time of loneliness, because someone's deployed in the Middle East, lives too far away to visit, or is in a nursing home. Quite possibly, stress, despondency, or struggles in our faith life can make "tidings of comfort and joy" seem like a bitter hoax or fanciful myth.

Whatever the cause, the result can be the same: We feel like we're sitting next to John the Baptist in his prison cell. We may phrase our misgivings differently than did John. Maybe *we* ask, "Why aren't things better? Why aren't *I* better? Is this all there is to Christmas?" Or maybe, like Scrooge, we just mutter, "Bah, humbug!"

But the questions are honest. Why *isn't* the world a better place since the birth of Jesus? Why *hasn't* our Lord acted according to the faithful proclamation of John and the prophecy of Isaiah? Why *hasn't*

Jesus cast fire from heaven; cleared his threshing-floor of chaff; and judged evildoers? Why *haven't* sickness, poverty, and war been eliminated since the life, death and resurrection of the One who is acclaimed our great Physician and good Shepherd; who is called the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace? Are Jews right to reject Jesus, because he seems to fail at being the Messiah who establishes his throne of peace and righteousness throughout the earth? Or are those atheists right who post billboards stating, "You know it's not true; this season, celebrate reason!" Maybe John's question to Jesus really does sum it up best: *Are you the one who is to come, or should we wait for another? And perhaps we add: Is there another?*

Jesus' answer to John's disciples, at first hearing, is pretty underwhelming. "Tell John what you hear and see. The deaf hear, the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed; the dead are raised, and the poor have good news preached to them." That's nice, as far as it goes. Miracles are wonderful; but they seem limited and selective. We see the heartaches of our own lives and ask: why hasn't *my* mom been healed? Why must *my* family declare bankruptcy? Why did *my* husband have to die? Why do *I* hear only bad news, not good?

Perhaps we reason, "Well, it's not just about my little life; it's about the greater good." But even then, don't we have our doubts?

Miracles of healing ring hollow when we ponder the health care crisis and the many special interests putting in their 2 cents - or 2 billion dollars - worth. It's great that the poor hear good news - but what about programs to lift them out of poverty? We're glad that some lepers were cleansed - but how about cleansing communities of violence, corporations of greed, and politics of corruption? The Rev. Frederick Bruner, reflecting on his missionary experience in the Philippines in the '70's and '80's, notes the seductive appeal of liberation theology in that country. Because Jesus brought spiritual salvation but not political solutions for the here-and-now, some Christians reason, they are free to trust *him* for eternal liberation - and Marxism for earthly liberation.

But, Bruner concluded, "this double vision did not work; no one can look for two messiahs, for one will always eclipse the other, and in our experience in the Philippines *the one eclipsed was Jesus*. Jesus is either the fully competent Liberator, or he is nothing at all."

No wonder Jesus said, "Blessed are they who are not offended because of me!" I love Rev. Bruner's take on this: *Now for the end of his sermon to John, Jesus saves these words, tailor-made for John (and for all of us who wonder if Jesus is really It). Jesus pitches his tune low, puts the cookies on a shelf John can reach, and promises, in so many words, "And God bless you, John, if you do not throw the whole*

thing over because I am a different kind of Messiah than you were expecting!"

Jesus gently turns John's - and our - attention from our *own* experiences, questions, and expectations, to the reality of who *He* is; what *He* is doing; and how *that* frames the contours of what it means to actually *be* the Messiah. "Tell John what you are actually *seeing* and *hearing*." As one commentator puts it, "*Seeing* what Jesus does and *hearing* what Jesus says is the way, the only way, that leads to faith. Another means *by which we can make ourselves or others into believers simply does not exist.*"

Okay, so how does that really address our everyday lives, and what we see in the world around us? I am going to start answering this in such a way that you'll think I'm nuts. *We don't baptize whole villages with fire hoses; and we don't shoot Communion wafers from cannons into hungry crowds.* What I mean is this. Yes, God so loves *the world*. Yes, Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins *of the world*. Yes, the day will come when His Kingdom is *universal*; when *every* knee shall bow and *every* tongue confess Him as Lord and God. Yes, Jesus even speaks to John's disciples about his ministry in broad, sweeping terms - "the lame; the blind; the dead; the poor" - not merely "a few blind men; one or two paralytics; one dead girl and ten lepers, and, oh, I

dunno, a few thousand poor people have received the benefits of My ministrations."

Still, the actual means by which healing, salvation, forgiveness, sight, release from bondage, and life is universally given *is one on one*. Jesus painstakingly touches *this* sick person, then *this one*; He doesn't wave a magic wand over the whole crowd and say, "Abracadabra, poof, you're all cured." Jesus takes Jairus's dead daughter by the hand and says, "Little girl arise;" then tells her parents to give her something to eat because undoubtedly she's hungry. He doesn't scatter Immortality Dust over every cemetery gravestone! Jesus instructs a hungry crowd to sit in small groups, and has His disciples distribute bread and fish personally to each group; He doesn't organize a High Commission on Hunger, nor even set up food banks in every Galilean village.

Some social activists severely criticized Mother Teresa for this very reason. She did so little, it seemed, to attack and eliminate the root causes of the wretched poverty and despair of the people for whom her order of nuns cared. Instead, she simply bathed and bandaged them; touched them; found a clean blanket for them to lie on; gave them a sip of water and a morsel of food; and assured them that though they were poor, wretched, sick, and dying, yet they mattered; they were loved. In the grand scheme of things, this was a tiny,

ineffective drop in the bucket of suffering. In our Lord's scheme of things, it was standard operating procedure.

Of course there's a crying need for High Commissions on Hunger, Poverty, Violence, and every other injustice and sorrow that afflicts the human race. *Of course* there's great value in finding and eliminating root causes; in enacting legislation; in affecting the lives of millions or even billions of people at a time through scientific breakthroughs, public health measures, and international mandates.

But when all is said and done, the final mystery of hope given to the hopeless; healing granted to the broken; forgiveness bestowed upon the sinner; faith activated in the doubting; nourishment shared with the hungering; comfort extended to the sorrowful; and life given to the dead... is one on one, *in seeing what Jesus is doing and hearing what Jesus is saying.*

That's why the Church has something priceless to offer; something no agency, government, organization or commission, no matter how well-intended, high-minded or generously-endowed, can offer. *The Church offers Jesus Himself to each and every human being, no matter how "out of synch" they are with the world; no matter what anguish or despair they are feeling; no matter how alienated they feel from God.*

A controversial but brilliant theologian named Rudolph Bultmann insisted that *Jesus speaks today* - present tense - in the proclamation of what biblical writers *wrote yesterday* - past tense - about Jesus' words and deeds.

Whenever we hear the *Gospel*, we sinful mortals, sorrowing children of Adam, the truly poor in this broken and death-shadowed world, are in the living presence of Jesus, the Good News incarnate. Whenever one of us is baptized, or receives Holy Absolution, the fruit of Baptism, we are cleansed and made whole as surely as if we were a first-century leper or paralytic touched by the very hand of Jesus. Whenever we receive Holy Communion, we are healed and raised from death as surely as anyone who was miraculously cured by our Lord.

So if you're feeling "out of synch," take heart! You've come to the right place. You're already being led out of the prison of despair, sorrow, gloom and death, into the living and loving presence of Jesus. You're among friends and fellow disciples who are learning to believe that Jesus really is present, no matter how things seem or how we feel - and who are learning how to share His presence, one on one, person to person. You're in a place that believes, teaches, preaches, *and practices* the slow, unspectacular nurturing of souls that are precious to their Savior. In this place, you hear Jesus' words: you are loved. You matter. You are not alone. You are forgiven. I will never abandon you. And, with

the Spirit's tutelage, you might again confess: "You *are* the Messiah,
the One for whom I have waited! Amen! Come, Lord Jesus come!"