

SERMON FOR 3 ADVENT
(Cape Town, 14 December 2008)

Text: ² When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples ³ to ask him, “Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?” ⁴ Jesus replied, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: ⁵ The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. ⁶ Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.” ⁷ As John’s disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: “What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? ⁸ If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings’ palaces. ⁹ Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ This is the one about whom it is written: ”‘I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.’ (Matthew 11:2-10)

This 3rd of Advent focuses on the role that John the Baptist played in the Advent of the Messiah. There is little doubt that John was a very interesting man who drew large crowds of people to the Jordan river where he was preaching and baptising. He was definitely not traditional, but unconventional to the extreme. I can tell you: He didn’t wear a tie and jacket or a fancy Mediterranean robe. Instead he wore a coat made of camels hair and a leather belt tied around his waist. His diet consisted of locusts and honey. And his home was the desert.

It could be that many people were drawn to him simply because they were fascinated by his appearance. Like his appearance his preaching was “wild”. He didn’t mix his words. He called a spade a spade. To some Pharisees and Sadducees who came to the Jordan river to see why the crowds were gathering there, he said: “***You brood of vipers... Do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ (God wants fruit)... and every tree that does not produce fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire***” (Mt.3:7-10). John was, we what would call today, a “fire and brimstone” preacher. His favourite line was: “***Repent for the Kingdom of God is near.***”

John wasn’t an ordinary man. And when the events of this sermon text unfolded, he was in prison, suffering for his faith. In the second half of our sermon text, Jesus pays tribute to him. To the crowd that gathered around him, he said. “***What did you expect to see in the desert?. A reed swayed in the wind?***” In other words: “Did you expect A man who talks his audience up?. Who says one thing today and another thing tomorrow?” And Jesus carried on and said: “***Or did you expect a man dressed in fine cloths? No, those who wear fine cloths and kings places.***” “***Or Did you expect a prophet?***”, Jesus asked. And then he added and said: “***This man is more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written: ‘I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way for you.’***”

But the question we want to ask today is this: Why did the Messiah need a messenger? Or why did he need a forerunner to prepare the way for him? Why didn’t he just come?

The answer to this question is in fact quiet simple: The Messiah needed a messenger, because the people would otherwise not have recognised him. And they would not have recognised because he, or the coming of Kingdom of God, was so totally different to what everybody expected.

If you had heard, that “God” is coming and that he would be establishing “his” kingdom on earth, what would have been your expectations? Fact is, when Jesus arrived he did not come in a kingly procession (and some of us may have expected). Instead he came in a way so inconspicuous, so modest, that the chances were great that nobody would have observed him. This Messiah needed somebody to point him out.

This was John’s role. The pointing out started off with a “star” in Bethlehem; then shepherds were told that a Saviour had been born, wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. And just before Jesus started his public ministry, there was John the Baptist.

When Jesus arrived at the Jordan river, he didn’t strike anybody’s notice. His was this “ordinary” man from Nazareth, John’s nephew, the son of a carpenter. But when John saw his nephew, the holy Spirit touched his heart. And when Jesus approached the water it dawned on him, and he pointed to Jesus and said: **“Look, the Lamb of God. Who takes away the sin of the world ”** (John 1:29).

What the people saw in Jesus then and thereafter was not what they had expected in the arrival of the long awaited Messiah. Today many Jews are therefore still waiting for him to come. They had visaged an arrival “in power”. They expected the arrival of one whose might and power superceded anything seen in this world, dwarfing even the power of the mighty Roman emperor.

But there he was: A man like you me. In fact, not even like you me. He was a peasant, who belonged to the “working class” . This God “needed” somebody to point him out.

This hasn’t changed, not even today. This is why God continues to have messengers. Invariably people are disappointed in this God. They overlook him. And inevitably they look somewhere else to have their “spiritual desires” fulfilled. This God does not meet their expectations.

Invariably when we humans think “divine” we think “supernatural”. God is somehow always equated with might and power: A huge crowd, a powerful preacher, followed by a display of supernatural miracles. But when he comes quietly, he is overlooked. A God who does not shout or scream on the streets, is not heard. The “mystery” of the Messiah needs a messenger that points it out.

That is exactly what John did. And that is why he is hailed as the greatest of all prophets. He was chosen by God and given the honour to literally and physically point to the Messiah: “There he is who will baptise not with water, but fire and the holy Spirit.” Meaning, there is the one who (like with fire) will cleanse you from all your sins and reconcile you with God.

John is the greatest of all prophets because he pointed to the Messiah.

But there is another side to John. On the one hand he is indeed this reed that is not swayed by the wind. And man of great conviction who says what needs to be said, without fear or trepidation. But this is not the way we see him in the first part of our text. What we see is a *messenger in doubt*.

He had pointed the Messiah out, but he had reached a point, where “he” himself suddenly doubted. John was not immune to his own ingrained personal desires and expectations. He had

expected a bit more, when he (with a booming voice) had announced the imminent arrival of the Kingdom of God. Fact was, the world went on its merry way: The children played in the streets, the women went to the markets, the tax collectors continued to cheat. There was no clear separation of the sheep and the goats. No gathering of the wheat in the barn and the burning of the chaff.

The only catastrophe that happened was that he, John, was thrown into prison. And as John sat in prison he waited expectantly for the visible advent of the messianic age. But when nothing out of the ordinary happened, he himself began to doubt. He sent his disciples to Jesus asking: ***“Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?”*** (V.3). John swayed between faith and doubt.

This is the way the Bible describes many of the “great men”. The very nature of faith is that “faith” and “doubt”, “trust” and “Anfechtung”, go hand in hand. If there was never any doubt, faith would be superfluous. But God chose the path of “faith”. And he did so because he is interested in a relation of “trust” and “love”. He does not overpower us, not even by miracles. Instead he calls us to “let go” of everything and to “follow him” *in faith*.

John’s “faith” prompts him to approach Jesus with his doubt. And Jesus honours him with an answer. He points him to the Scriptures and he repeats what always had been written about him: ***“The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor”*** (v.5).

That sounds like “miracles”, doesn’t it? But the “key” lies in the one feature that is common to all of these miracles. And that is “where” they take place. They take place amongst the poor and the destitute. The Messiah is there where nobody expected him. He is amongst those people who based on their illnesses, physical disabilities, or obvious sins, are viewed to be *not* fit for the Kingdom of God. He is with the tax collectors. He eats with them. He talks to a prostitute, gently. To those who are blind, and must sit “outside the temple gates”, he gives sight (and invites them in).

Why? Because he wants to make it clear: The kingdom of God is also for these people. The Kingdom of God dawns on the desperate, on those who “need” God. ***“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven”*** (Mt.5:50).

Those who don’t need God, never experience the Kingdom. In fact, you don’t see it. You cannot say: “Here it is” or “There it is!” It comes quietly and to the most unexpected places. Inevitably it surprises you - not with supernatural miracles, but acts of love and a spirit of unconditional acceptance.

But nobody would even notice the presence of the Messiah, if it wasn’t for the messenger who says: ***“Look, the Lamb of God, who takes the sins of the world away.”*** And I am telling you today: Look, He is here amongst us! Amen.

Dieter Reinstorf