

Along the track

The Reign of God – Are You the One?

(First of four meditations on the Kingdom)

John the Baptist was a man for all seasons – a man with a message, even for today. He was an important figure in our understanding of Jesus' role and in the nature of the Reign of God.

From his prison cell, John sent a messenger to ask Jesus: Are you 'the One' we have been waiting for? It would be easy to overlook how desperate that question was. Are you the one I have spent my life preparing for? Are you the one for whom I gave up everything? Are you the one who will free Israel – or have I wasted my time? "Are you the one?" Has he failed? Has it all been for nothing?

John comes with significant credentials. His father was Zechariah, priest of the Temple and his mother, Elizabeth, was a descendent of the High Priest Aaron. At some point John abandoned the temple with its hierarchy, its rituals, its strict purification requirements and the ever-growing list of laws and precepts, its corrupt practices which so upset Jesus at a later occasion. John lived his message - he was an ascetic living in the wilderness, eating locusts and wild honey and dressing in the clothing of repentance, sackcloth. But there was a purpose in his style of living as he gathered those who wished to be faithful to God's ways, to the Covenant of old.

In John's view, this was a time of deep crisis, much more serious than times of old when the people went astray. The people had become rebellious, they had abandoned God and God's ways. Corruption had set in at every level. This corruption even infected Temple sacrifices and rituals – they no longer amounted to anything before God! If you wanted proof of that, the Israelites had lost the Promised Land to the Romans who now occupied the very land God had given them as their inheritance!

The situation, as far as John was concerned, was 'hopeless,' these were 'end times.' He demanded immediate action. He taught that 'judgment is at hand'. The axe is being laid to the roots (Matt 3:10-12; Luke 3:9; Luke 3:17). God was now abandoning his people – faithful people had to repent, to do penance, to reject the ways of the world. Come away with me into the desert – away from all this corruption, come into the wilderness to be cleansed, cross through the river to wash away corruption.

John was a strong and thunderous voice, confronting the high and the low, the ruling class of Judaism, even the king and the Roman occupiers, He willingly confronted the hypocrisy of the religious establishment (Matt 3:7; Luke 3:7). He did not hesitate to expose the immorality of King Herod. His condemnation of corrupt people in authority made him enemies and he chose to die a martyr's death rather than compromise his convictions (Matt 14:3-12; Mark 6:17-29).

John was the voice crying out in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." John wasn't trying to plunge the people into despair. He wanted to remind them of Israel's life in the desert before they entered the land God was giving them as an inheritance. Like the Israelites of old, he called on them to cross the river, to be purified in the waters of the Jordan, and once they were forgiven, once they had a change of mind and heart, he called on them to return to the Promised Land to welcome the imminent arrival of God. The world cannot continue as it has been, we have to learn to think differently, to live differently, to see life differently. John, in other words, calls in no uncertain terms for repentance – the fruits of that conversion will be seen when they share with those in need, eliminate graft, corruption, and extortion (Luke 3:11-14). He announced the coming of the Messiah who would, like Moses, free the Hebrew people again.

'Are you the One?' John asks. Are you really 'the Christ'? The fact that Jesus was not an ascetic, and that he actively sought the company of publicans and tax collectors must have made John wonder. What was most scandalous is not only that Jesus associates with sinners in the course of implementing this vision, but that he does so over meals, implicitly making them his intimate friends even before they have shown signs of repentance. Jesus did not shun the 'unclean' - he engaged with sinners, the corrupt. This wasn't just a different methodology – it was a radically different view and understanding of the reign of God. No wonder John is confused!

Jesus' answer must have made him wonder even more. 'Are you the One?' Tell John that the blind see, the lame walk and the poor have the gospel preached to them. Nothing about the rise of Judaism to new glory, nothing about the overthrow of the emperor.

Jesus' message is different. His message comes from quite a different perspective. Jesus talked about the Reign of God which was not coming in the future, but it was 'near', it was here now! People did need conversion, a change of heart as John had preached, not by withdrawing from the world and going into the desert, but by staying in the world and transforming it. God was offering salvation to everyone. God is not abandoning the world – God is present, the kingdom is here now, God is inviting people into relationship now.

Jesus' message puts hope into the heart of the people; these are not 'end times' but rather God invites us to work together to bring about the Reign of God here and now – the reign of love, of justice, peace, concern for each other.

Regards
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