St John the Baptist; Faith and doubt Stowe Church 11/12/2022

Readings Isaiah 35: 1-10 ; Matthew 11:1-14

Prophets tend to have a hard time of it. We talk about some people who go on about dreadful things which will happen as ‘prophets of doom’. But prophets in the Bible are more ‘forthtellers’ than ‘foretellers’. They are speaking out what they believe is God’s message at their time. They have to trust in the message they are given and it can get them into trouble. The book of Isaiah contains a mixture of God’s censure of the people and also very comforting words about the God who cares for them and will redeem them. There are also references about a Messiah figure -a shoot from the stem of Jesse and the Suffering Servant. This is why we have so many readings from Isaiah around the Christmas season.

John the Baptist was a prophet right on the cusp between the OT and NT. The difference was that John knew who Jesus was; he was even distantly related to him. He had been brought up to understand his purpose ***(Lk1:13-17)***. His main message was ‘repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand’ ‘God is coming repent of your sins’ and those who responded he baptised as a mark of washing away their sin. He recognised Jesus and acknowledged that Jesus was the Lamb of God, ie in some way a sacrifice. BUT John never lived to see the crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus. In our Matthew reading he seems to be having a wobble of faith. It was partly his own fault: in our reading John is languishing in the dungeons of King Herod Antipas’ fortress of Machaerus in the hills to the east of the Dead Sea. John had publicly rebuked Herod for seducing and marrying his brother’s wife. Imprisonment is never pleasant and incarceration for the free spirit of John must have been hard. His own friends could obviously visit and he heard about the ministry of Jesus, but in some ways it may have seemed to John that nothing much was happening. Was he just impatient or were his disciples asking questions or did John actually begin to have doubts about whether his whole life had been a mistake. So he sent his friends to talk to Jesus *“are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?”*

How does Jesus react? How might we have reacted in his place? No bluster, no indignation no anger. No theological argument, simply “*go and tell John what you see and hear, the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the dead are raised and the poor have good news brought to them.”* Jesus is saying this what the kingdom of God is like and it is here among you. And by implication *“yes, I am the one”*. I hope that the friends got back to John before he was beheaded by Herod.

In any faith, there are always the possibility and reality of times of doubt. What do we do when these come? Don’t isolate yourself with your thoughts, talk about it to someone you can trust. Ask God to help you and look again at Jesus in the Gospels. He is a real historical person. We can be utterly honest with God, after all we can have no secrets from him and he wants to help us return to faith. If John did have a wobble of faith then Jesus would not condemn him for it. Indeed Jesus gave him a glowing reference “truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist” wow. But then “ yet, the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he” wow again. John did not live to see and respond to the death on the cross and the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. He called Jesus the Lamb of God but he did not experience the sacrifice. He was still under the OT covenant.

We have that privilege and opportunity to know the forgiveness of God in a NT way.

It does not mean that John the Baptist will not get to heaven, he was a faithful servant of God and God is just. It is a matter of timing.

As we do prepare to celebrate the past event of Jesus birth let us remember that Advent is more of a time to make sure that we are following close to Christ, so that we are ready for the time when He returns in his power and glory.

If we are having a wobble of faith please ask God to restore the sense of awe and wonder at his birth and the awe and wonder of his future coming.

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