

## The Third Sunday of Advent

*Sunday between 11 and 17 December inclusive*

### Principal Service readings

Isaiah 35.1-10	Promise of fruitfulness and joy
Psalm 146.4-10 <i>or Magnificat</i>	The Lord protects and cares for the upright Mary's song of praise
James 5.7-10	Be patient for the coming of Lord is near
Matthew 11.2-11	Jesus and John the Baptist

### Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ,  
speak to our hearts in the stillness,  
keep us steadfast in the foundation that cannot be shaken,  
lift up our eyes to behold the vision of your glory;  
and perfect our faith, now and always. Amen.

Society of Saint Francis

### Gospel Reading

#### *Jesus and John the Baptist*

<sup>2</sup>When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples <sup>3</sup>and said to Jesus, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?' <sup>4</sup>Jesus answered them, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: <sup>5</sup>the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. <sup>6</sup>And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.'

<sup>7</sup>As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: 'What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? <sup>8</sup>What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. <sup>9</sup>What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. <sup>10</sup>This is the one about whom it is written,

"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way before you."

<sup>11</sup>Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.'

## Comments and Questions

It's strange, isn't it? In Matthew 3 John recognises Jesus and baptizes him (3.13-17), and yet here, in Matthew 11, he asks who Jesus is: 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to expect someone else?' (11.3). John's message was of divine retribution (3.7-12). When Jesus does not fulfil this, John asks whether Jesus can really be the promised Messiah. The question is open-ended, not pre-judging. Jesus' reply is to suggest looking at the evidence. But are these wonders of healing evidence of the messianic fulfilment of prophecies, as in Isaiah 35.5-6 and 61.1, or are they different from what was expected, and yet still point to him as Messiah? Is Jesus trying to manage the messianic expectations of his day? People saw the Messiah in various ways, such as a military leader, or a royal ruler.

Continuing with the questioning of expectations, Jesus then asks what people were expecting in John. Whatever their expectations, Jesus says he is 'more than a prophet' (11.9).

11.11 is perhaps problematic. For all his greatness, John seems less than the minimum standard for the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of heaven seems to establish a new era with higher standards. John may be the greatest figure of the past, but, as he belongs to a different age, a different stage of salvation history, he does not participate in the new stage, leading to the kingdom of heaven. Perhaps Jesus is saying simply that John the Baptist belongs to a different age.

## Quotations

### 1

Faith is not certainty but the courage to live with and for God in the presence of uncertainty and to hear the voice of God even in the heart of the whirlwind.

*Crisis and Covenant* / Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. 1992, p.41

<sup>1</sup> *New Revised Standard Version Bible* is copyright © 1989 Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

Christians in the West tend to look to prophecy for its apologetic value. Knowing something ahead of time is proof of the message's divine origin. Yet for Matthew, the fulfilment of Scripture is less about apologetics and more about God's sovereign purposes. The establishment of patterns of "fulfilment" confirms that all of human history is heading toward its goal and culmination in Christ.

Mark L. Strauss

## Related topics

*For further study:*

Advent; kingdom of God; eschatology; biblical justice; repentance and reconciliation; Christ's coming; future, present, past; Son of Man; parousia

## Closing Prayer

God of glory and compassion,  
at your touch the wilderness blossoms,  
broken lives are made whole,  
and fearful hearts grow strong in faith.

Open our eyes to your presence  
and awaken our hearts to sing your praise.  
To all who long for your Son's return  
grant perseverance and patience,  
that we may announce in word and deed  
the good news of the kingdom.

We ask this through him whose coming is certain,  
whose day draws near:  
your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ,  
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
God for ever and ever.

*Opening prayers · Advent 3, Year A<sup>2</sup>*

<sup>2</sup> *Opening prayers : scripture-related collects for the years A, B and C from the sacramentary* / International Commission on English in the Liturgy. – Norwich : Canterbury Press, 1999.