

### ***Great(Iy Mistaken) Expectations***

In the name of Jesus, dear friends in Christ: Last week when we met, we heard John the Baptizer thundering against the sin in the lives of his terrified hearers. He filled them with the fear of the Lord, threatening them with the wrath and judgment of God that would fall when the soon-to-appear Messiah revealed himself. John's mission was to prepare people for that day by calling them to repentance, turning them from their evil ways, and bestowing on them a baptism for the forgiveness of their sins. "Make ready his way" John urgently warned the crowds "and bear fruit in keeping with repentance; because if you're not bearing such fruit, you will be cut down and thrown into the fire." At that time John was the very picture of confidence.

But my how things have changed when we come to today's Gospel lesson. It's something like six months to a year later. In the interim, three important things have happened. First, Jesus has presented himself to John for baptism. John didn't want to do it. "You should be baptizing me" John told him. But Jesus insisted. "We must do this to fulfill all righteousness." So John consented. As Jesus came up out of the water, John saw the Spirit of God descend on Jesus in the form of a dove. And he heard the voice of the Father say, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." From that point on, whenever John saw Jesus, he pointed at him and said, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

The second important thing that's happened is that Jesus has launched his own ministry. After returning from his forty days of temptation in the desert, he's gone up north into Galilee. There he has begun to preach and teach in the synagogues. He's gathered the first of his disciples. He's also begun to perform astonishing miracles. When word of these developments came to John, he was pleased initially. "From here on" he said, "He must increase while I must decrease."

The third important thing that's happened is that John has been thrown into prison. In his zeal to cleanse the nation of sin, John held nothing back. He had no fear of speaking the truth to power. He publically accused Herod the tetrarch of committing adultery because he sent his wife away and then ran off with and married his brother Philip's wife. Her name was Herodias. She didn't like the bad press she was getting from John and wanted him dead. Herod didn't like the bad press either, but he also believed that John was a genuine prophet of God and he didn't want the blood of a holy man on his hands. So, in order to both silence John and keep him safe from his wife's assassins, he ordered him locked up in the dark dungeon of his fortress of Machaerus on the heights overlooking the eastern shore of the Dead Sea.

There John has sat in chains waiting. And waiting. And waiting some more; in stifling heat during the days, and in shivering cold through long desert nights. And while it's true that John was never much one addicted to creature comforts – he lived a very simple and ascetic life – his present circumstances are far worse than his normal level of self denial. He has a small group of disciples still loyal to him. They bring him what food and water he is permitted to have (back then such things were not provided by the prison). They also bring him scattered reports of the progress of Jesus' ministry in Galilee.

And John is unsettled by what he hears. He had great expectations regarding Jesus. In his preaching, John had told his frightened hearers that the Messiah when he appeared would bring swift judgment on the earth. With his divine mighty power he would sweep away the

wicked and usher in everlasting righteousness. “I baptize you with water” John told them “but he will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire”. What I merely wash, he will purify. You think I’m a scary guy? Wait till you see him. He will establish the Kingdom of God on the earth and people of all nations will be subject to him. *This* is what John expected of Jesus. More than that, John expected him to do it all *right now*.

But good grief, he sure seems to be taking his time. He’s hardly in a hurry at all. He just wanders around Galilee visiting synagogues and preaching things like “Blessed are the poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” and “Blessed are the hungry now, for you shall be filled” and “I say to you love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you; and to the one who strikes you on the cheek, turn to him the other also.” That’s all fine and well, but when’s he going take the gloves off and get it on? And why is still up in distant Galilee? Doesn’t he know the real action needs to take place in Jerusalem?

Other things John hears about Jesus disturb him. While John sits rotting in prison living off of what amounts to starvation rations, Jesus is going to lavish banquets – sometimes in the homes of notorious sinners. At a wedding feast in Cana, he is said to have miraculously made something like 200 gallons of wine. I guess the guy likes to party hearty. He’s further being sharply criticized for violating Sabbath rules and traditions. He seems to do it routinely. What’s up with that? One of his handpicked disciples is a tax collector – and not one of the repentant ones who came to the Jordan to be baptized; no, this guy was sitting there robbing people blind until the second he was called. Then there was a Roman centurion. He asked Jesus to cure one of his servants who was deathly ill. Jesus did it – and then he commended the centurion for his great faith, greater than anything he’d seen in all of Israel he said. It’s like first aiding and abetting our enemy oppressors, and then insulting God’s own chosen people.

John had great expectations of Jesus; but he didn’t expect anything like what’s being reported to him. And so, John begins to think that maybe he was greatly mistaken—not about his expectations, but about Jesus himself. *Maybe he’s not who I thought he was. He sure isn’t acting like it.* Thus it is that he sends two of his disciples to Jesus to ask the question, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?”

It’s worth noting than when the two disciples ask the question, Jesus does not criticize John for his failing faith in him. Instead, he directs the two messengers to relay to John what they have witnessed themselves: “the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the good news preached to them.” In other words, tell John that I am fulfilling the messianic promises made by the Lord through the prophets. I am doing what the Scriptures say the Messiah will do. So, yes, I am the one who is to come; and no, you should not look for another.

To strengthen John’s weak faith, Jesus points him to God’s Word and demonstrates that he *is* fulfilling it. The problem is not that Jesus wasn’t doing things right; it’s that John’s great expectations were greatly mistaken. Mostly it was in the way that John had constructed the timetable in his mind. He had conflated the Savior’s second coming – the final judgment – with his first coming in mercy to save sinners. But Jesus must do both. He has to fulfill *all* Scripture.

And to his message to John Jesus adds this: “Blessed is the one who is not offended by me.” That is to say, John I’ve got this. Trust me. I know what I am doing. Don’t let what you hear shake your faith in me if it doesn’t line up with your expectations.

Of course, this will be a big problem throughout Jesus' entire ministry: he won't meet peoples' expectations. But it won't be because he's not doing things right, it will be because peoples' expectations about him are wrong. And when he doesn't do things like they expect, they will be offended by him.

Certainly this was the case with the Pharisees, the most scrupulously religious and outwardly righteous people on the planet. They expected a Messiah who would praise them for being so godly and observant of the Law. Instead he attacked their man-made rules and traditions. He called them to repent of their pride and self-righteousness. He told them repentant sinners and tax collectors were entering the kingdom of God while they remained outside of it. And yes, it offended them. It caused them to reject him.

It was also the case with his own disciples. They expected a Messiah who would establish an earthly kingdom. They expected to see themselves as his highest officers, helping him to rule over a vast empire. And that would mean living in palaces and great luxury, exercising enormous power, and having people bow down to them and render all kinds of honors. It was precisely these mistaken expectations that caused them to tune him out when he told them things like "the Son of man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." Small wonder then that every one of them was offended and lost faith in him when they saw him doing that very thing: giving his life on the cross for the sins of the world. That's when he became the least in the kingdom of God. That's when he was the servant of all, and serving in the lowest and most humiliating capacity possible. But it's also why Jesus can say that the one who is least in the kingdom is greater than John, the greatest of those born of women.

Though his death for sin was prophesied as the main part of his messianic mission, no one expected it. Nor did they expect his resurrection three days later, though that too was prophesied and he himself had told his disciples about it repeatedly. Good thing for us that he knew what he was doing – even if it didn't meet anyone's mistaken expectations.

And that's the takeaway for us: he still knows what he's doing, and we can trust him even when he's not meeting our expectations. It can happen when we find ourselves in a situation like John's, when we're uncomfortable, enduring hardship, facing a crisis of some kind, and we think to ourselves, I didn't think it would be like this. Why is the Lord permitting this to go on? Why doesn't he act like I think he should? Why doesn't he act right now? A very widespread notion in American Christianity is that the Lord wants all believers to be healthy, wealthy, and deliriously happy all of the time. And if you just have enough faith, you'll be all of that. It's a greatly mistaken expectation. The Lord hasn't promised you any of that. Quite the contrary: he promised you a cross to bear. He's told us in this world we will have trouble; but still we are to be of good cheer because he has overcome the world. He brings us hardship not to offend us and to shake our faith in him, but to keep us faithful and reliant upon him. He knows what he's doing. And he knows what is best to keep you faithful unto death and to life eternal.

It's likely that John expected that Jesus would rise up and set him free from his prison cell. He wasn't expecting to die a martyr's death. But he did. And now he wears the crown of life. May the Lord free us of mistaken expectations that may cause us to be offended or to lose heart, and may he direct us instead to the promises that he has made to us in Christ Jesus that we may live and die in the faith and receive with John the crown of life. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***