

Seeing What Is There

John the Baptist was in Herod's dungeon, expecting the Messiah to deliver him. Since John could not understand why Jesus did not do so, he finally sent a poignant message through his disciples, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus tells John not to let his preconceived ideas of what the Messiah should do block John from understanding what Jesus is doing: He is ministering to the poor and afflicted. If it isn't exactly what John expected, he must not let that be an obstacle to accepting Jesus as he is.

Jesus is calling on John—and through him on us all—to believe in Jesus by a free choice. He wants us to believe because we freely choose to recognize him as Savior and as God. Every rational conclusion, as a matter of fact, is a free choice, a judgment for which we take responsibility. Faith is no exception to this. But because faith is an acceptance of the person of Jesus Christ, the choice to believe in him is also an act of love. In the last analysis, to believe in and hope in Christ unconditionally, we need to love him unconditionally. It is a theme of the Gospel According to John that our recognition of truth depends on our love for goodness (see John 8:42-47).

Isaiah invites us to keep our love alive by dreaming of what God's messenger comes to do: The desert shall rejoice and blossom; we will see the glory and majesty of our God; the blind will see, the deaf hear, the speechless will sing, the lame shall leap like deer. Those whom the Lord has ransomed shall return and come to Zion with singing. Sorrow and sighing shall flee. Our God is coming. We need to recall this in order to strengthen weak hands and feeble knees and to reassure ourselves when we are fright-

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3RD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 35:1-6a, 10; James 5:7-10;
Matthew 11:2-11

ened.

James writes similarly in his letter, "Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near." James offers three practical suggestions: 1) Be patient like farmers who wait for the earth to produce its crop. 2) Don't criticize one another. Focusing on faults and failings in the Church often fosters only discouragement. 3) Look to the prophets for encouragement, to those who have borne witness to Christ regardless of the cost to themselves.

In effect, James simply reworks what Jesus said to John, "Persevere in faith and hope out of love. Do not

judge God or the Church by what is not happening or get fixated on what you think God should be accomplishing through the Church. Look at what *is* happening. Those blind to faith are beginning to see; those deaf to God's word are beginning to listen; the poor are having the gospel preached to them. Ministry

is taking place and God's power is working through all of it. Grace is visible in human beings, in human actions in the Church, right now for those who have eyes to see."

When we see God embodied in the human—as in

Jesus, the “shoot from the stump of Jesse”—or when we see in the Church grace made visible in human actions grounded in faith, hope or love, this encourages us. It confirms our faith, strengthens our hope, excites our love. When God’s presence and action through grace are made visible in human actions, we find it easier to believe the divine promises, the vision of joy and peace which Isaiah holds out to us.

That is why we need saints and modern-day prophets. Such prophets point out to us how the general, abstract teachings of Jesus apply to the concrete circumstances of our time and place. We are consecrated by Baptism to do this for each other by enfleshing in our lives the attitudes and values of the gospel.

REFLECTING ON THIS WEEK'S GOSPELS

Third Week of Advent

Pray daily: Lord, give me the grace never to turn away from you or from your Church because my own expectations are not being met. Teach me to look always at what is most authentic and most inspiring; help me to embrace these for myself. Amen.

Monday: Matthew 21:23-27. Jesus said to them in reply, “I will also ask you one question. Did the baptism of John come from heaven, or was it of human origin?” Can you say without hesitation that the Church is of divine origin? How does that help?

Tuesday: Matthew 21:28-32. Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.” Do you take the benefits of your religion for granted? Who are some modern-day prophets?

Wednesday: Luke 7:18-23. “John summoned two of his disciples and sent them to the Lord to ask, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?’” What disappoints you in the Church? Does it come more from human weakness or from malice? Would focusing more on the blessings of God’s word, the sacraments, the example of the saints help you deal with this disappointment? Does it require other action?

Thursday: Luke 7:24-30. “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? Someone dressed in soft robes? A prophet?” What are you really seeking from the Church’s ministers? Are you willing to be shaken up? Challenged? How have you responded to modern-day prophets?

Friday: John 5:33-36. “He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light.” Has anyone in the Church inspired you? How? Have you ever changed something in your own life because of someone else’s example?

Saturday: Matthew 1:1-17. Matthew’s Gospel begins: “An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.” If God despised the human race, would God have become in Jesus a member of the human family? Do you recognize Jesus as a fellow member of the human race?

LIVING THIS WEEK'S GOSPELS

As Christian: Make a fully conscious, deliberate, personal, adult act of faith in Jesus as the world’s Savior and your Savior.

As Disciple: Read the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), looking for what Jesus taught. Has any of this been so watered-down by the actions of Christians that we now take a lower ideal for granted? Which parts?

As Prophet: Choose from Scripture one principle which Jesus taught; you could start with Matthew 5:38-42. Focus on living it out this week. Find a new and creative application of this principle to your own circumstances.

As Priest: Select one thing that bothers you in the Church or in other people. Then follow the advice in James 5:7-10.

As King: Look around you at work, at home, in your social life. Ask what is not yet the way it should be when Christ returns. Make the appropriate changes.