

Matthew 11:2-11

² When John heard in prison of the works of the Messiah, he sent his disciples to him ³ with this question, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?” ⁴ Jesus said to them in reply, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵ the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them. ⁶ And blessed is the one who takes no offense at me.” ⁷ As they were going off, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John, “What did you go out to the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? ⁸ Then what did you go out to see? Someone dressed in fine clothing? Those who wear fine clothing are in royal palaces. ⁹ Then why did you go out? To see a prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.

¹⁰ This is the one about whom it is written:

‘Behold, I am sending my messenger ahead of you;
he will prepare your way before you.’

¹¹ Amen, I say to you, among those born of women there has been none greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Context

The “works of the Christ” (Mt 11:2), which have been set out in chapters 5–10, provoked different responses from different groups. These responses, most of which consist of misunderstanding if not outright rejection, are examined in chapters 11–12, and explained in the parables of chapter 13. Further examples of the response to Jesus will occur in chapters 14–16, until the true response is found in Peter’s confession in 16:13–20, which will bring the second main part of Matthew’s Gospel to its climax. This is the thread which runs through these chapters. Through them we are led from a view of Jesus as others saw him to the true confession of him as Messiah which eluded most of his contemporaries, conditioned as they were by erroneous or inadequate ideas of the Messiah.

More immediately, this passage marks a transition. “When Jesus finished giving these commands to his twelve disciples, he went away from that place to teach and to preach in their towns” (Mt 11:1). With this one verse, Matthew signals the end of the missionary discourse (Mt 10) in 11:1 with nothing said about the disciples’ actual mission or their return (as in Luke 9). The spotlight remains on Jesus as he continues his work. The themes of unbelief and rejection that were so prominent in the missionary discourse are continued, but we are given more information about Jesus’ identity as the Messiah (11:1–6), the Wisdom of God (11:25–30), and the Servant of God (12:15–21).

This passage also has a liturgical context in its use as the Gospel of the 3rd Sunday in Advent, Gaudete Sunday. On the 2nd Sunday of Advent, our Gospel reading presented the preaching of John the Baptist. Near the end of this reading, Matthew portrays John, not only as a prophet, but as a forerunner to Jesus. John is quoted as speaking about “the one who is coming after me,” who “is mightier than I” (3:11), which makes this selection especially appropriate for Advent. On the 3rd Sunday of Advent this year, we read the episode in which John, already in prison, sends some of his disciples to ask Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?” (11:3). Jesus does not respond directly, but simply points out that he is doing the things Isaiah mentions in describing a time when people will experience God’s glory and splendor, restoration and salvation (alluding to Isa 35:1-6, this Sunday’s first reading). It is this accent, in anticipation of its joyous fulfillment that gives Gaudete Sunday its focus.

In either its scriptural or liturgical focus, a key point is that if both prophet and Messiah have appeared, then their joint call to repentance (recall 3:2; 4:17) must be urgently heeded – be it John’s message unremittingly austere or Jesus also preaching the joy of the kingdom (11:16–19).

Commentary

The Baptist, whose proclamation introduced Matthew's presentation of the Messiah (3:1–12), is now appropriately called as the first witness to the meaning of Jesus' ministry. Yet John's response is equivocal, positive but uncertain. Nonetheless his is a preparatory role for the true time of fulfillment. John remains the one who points forward, even if uncertain.

John's question: "Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?"

John's arrest was mentioned in 4:12, yet the full story of his imprisonment will wait until 14:3–12. No doubt he had anxiously followed the career of the one whom he had recognized as his superior (3:14–15) and had probably already taken to be the '*mightier one*' for whose coming he had prepared (3:11–12). *The Christ* is Matthew's description of Jesus, and sums up the impression he has aimed to convey.

John, as his question shows, was not yet ready to be so positive, though he would have liked to be. His hesitation was probably due (as v. 6 suggests) to a discrepancy between his expectations for 'the coming one' and what he actually heard about Jesus. The ministry so far recorded does not match up with the expectations of 3:11–12, and the miracles which are its most obvious feature were not a part of the common Messianic expectation. John may also have found it difficult to accept a Jewish 'Messiah' who failed to fast as his own followers did (9:14 *ff.*), and who kept the sort of company which a careful Jew would avoid (9:9 *ff.*).

The evidence to which Jesus points is not immediately conclusive, as it does not chime in with the popular (and probably John's) idea of the Messiah's work. But his words are an unmistakable allusion to passages in Isaiah which describe God's saving work (Isa. 35:5–6; cf. 29:18), and the mission of his anointed servant (Isa. 61:1). Six specifics are enumerated: the healing of blindness (cf. 9:27–28; 12:22; 20:30; 21:14), lameness (cf. 15:30–31; 21:14), leprosy (cf. 8:20), and deafness (cf. 9:32–33; 12:22; 15:30–31); the raising of the dead (cf. 9:18; 10:8); and evangelism to the poor (cf. 4:14–17, 23; 5:3; Luke 4:18).

If these did not form part of the general expectation, and of John's, they should have done. In Jesus' own understanding of his mission, Isaiah 61:1–2 looms large (Luke 4:18ff.; and cf. above on 5:3–4). The relief of suffering, literally fulfilled in his healing miracles reaches its climax in *good news to the poor*, the godly minority described in the beatitudes of chapter 5 (the '*ʾānāwīm*'). If this is too gentle a mission for John's Messianic hopes, he has missed the biblical pattern on which Jesus' mission is founded.

Jesus seems to understand the difference in messianic expectations and the true nature of the kingdom and so hopes that none *take offence* (v.6). This is the same verb (*skandalizō*) as in 5:29–30, 'be tripped up by' (see Notes below). Many were 'put off' by Jesus, when his style of ministry failed to tally with their expectations, and even offended against accepted conventions. '*Good news to the poor*' was an offence to the establishment, while a mission of the relief of suffering and the restoration of sinners would be at best irrelevant to those who fought for national liberation. It took spiritual discernment not to be 'put off' by Jesus, and such perception was enviable. *And blessed is the one who takes no offense at me* – while it applies directly to John's state of uncertainty, this beatitude is also a key to the theme of this section of the Gospel, which will introduce many who found Jesus hard to take.

Jesus' View of John

John's preaching had created a sensation (see 3:5), and the movement *into the wilderness* had been a remarkable phenomenon. Jesus now examines its motives, to show the real significance of John. The series of three questions and answers suggests motives progressively closer to a true understanding of John. *A reed shaken by the wind* is a metaphor for a weak, pliable person; John was not such a person,

and the implied answer is ‘*Of course not*’. It was John’s rugged independence which attracted a following. Nor was he *dressed in fine clothing*; far from it, as 3:4 shows. It was as a man conspicuously separate from the *royal palace* that attracted them. (There may be an ironical reference to his present residence in a ‘*royal palace*’—as a prisoner of conscience in Herod’s fortress) His rough clothing in fact points to his real role, as *a prophet* (see 3:4), and the crowds would gladly have accepted this description of John. But even that is not enough.

Tucked into the discussion of John the Baptist is an intriguing composite OT quotation. The disciples of John have returned to their imprisoned master with Jesus’ answer to their question about his identity. Jesus takes this occasion to comment on John to the crowds (11:7–19). He dispels the notion that John was a weak or pampered figure (11:7–8), declaring instead that he was a genuine prophet, “*and more than a prophet*” (11:9). In language reminiscent of earlier testimony concerning John (see 3:3), Jesus explains, “*This is the one about whom it is written* (a standard way of referring to Hebrew Scripture),

*‘Behold, I am sending my messenger ahead of you;
he will prepare your way before you.’*

(Exodus 23:20)
(Malachi 3:1)

The first clause quotes Exod. 23:20; the second, Mal. 3:1. In context, Exod. 23:20 refers to God sending his angel to guard the Israelites, as they proceed from Mount Sinai, to prepare the way for them to take possession of the promised land. But in both Greek and Hebrew, the same words can mean either “angel” or “messenger” (and angels typically function as messengers), so an application to a human messenger in a different context follows naturally.

The language of Exod. 23:20 recurs in Mal. 3:1. Malachi’s prophecy may in fact deliberately allude to the Exodus text. This time, however, the messenger seems to refer to a human being who will prepare the way for the Lord to come suddenly to his temple, a messenger who in Mal. 4:5 is equated with Elijah and described as one who “*will turn the fathers’ hearts toward their children*” (4:6), an example of the reconciliation that results from the kind of repentance for which John the Baptist had been calling.

The primary function of the composite citation is to answer the question of John’s identity. As in Mt. 3:3, he is viewed as a great prophet, preparing for the arrival of the messianic age. His ministry overlaps the beginning of the Messiah’s ministry, but he will not live to be part of the new covenant inaugurated by Christ’s death. But if the forerunner is here, then the Messiah must be near.

Indeed, John is the greatest of all pre-kingdom humans (“*those born among women*”), but because of the greatness of the kingdom age, all of the kingdom’s citizens will in some sense be greater even than John (11:11; cf. 11:13).

And a Messiah who can so solemnly pronounce John the greatest of all mortals to date (11:11) sounds like someone who thinks that he is more than a mere mortal. This suspicion is reinforced when we realize that Jesus is substituting his coming for the day of the Lord (i.e., the coming of Yahweh) in Mal. 4:5.

Some Final Thoughts

Within the narrative of Matthew, John the Baptists helps establish the identity of Jesus – something especially key during the Advent Season. “Whose birth are we preparing for, anyway?” And this is as important a question for us in our day as it was in the life and time of John the Baptist.

Then as now I suspect Jesus would still not fit our messianic expectations, would fail to conform to our popular messianic expectations. Why? Then as now, and in keeping with Gospel tradition, our expectations of Jesus probably mostly correct but almost certainly incomplete. We should not think

ourselves immune from “hometown expectations.” In contrast to what Jesus was did and said, many contemporary people harbor false or incomplete expectations about Christ that need correcting.

A friar priest, a friend of mine, holds that if one hasn’t been offended by the gospel that is Jesus, it is likely that one has an incomplete understanding of the gospel. A Jesus who is always comforting and never afflicting is an incomplete Jesus.

Notes

Matthew 11:2 *in prison*: see Matthew 4:12; 14:1-12. The works of the Messiah: the deeds of Matthew 8-9.

Matthew 11:3 *the one who is to come*: This is not known as a Messianic title in OT usage, however, Is 59:20 uses the same verbal construction to refer to God coming as Redeemer to Zion.

Matthew 11:4 *Jesus said...in reply*: Jesus does not answer directly rather telling John’s followers to report the things they have witnessed and heard. There are two possible understandings of such a response. (a) Jesus does the deeds of the Messiah (*cf.* 11:2) and his works answer John in the affirmative. (b) Jesus demands a reinterpretation of the signs by which the “*the one who is to come*” is to be discerned – i.e., by such deeds and not military conquests.

Matthew 11:5 *the blind regain...the poor have the good news proclaimed to them*” Jesus’ response is taken from passages of Isaiah (Isaiah 26:19; 29:18-19; 35:5-6; 61:1) that picture the time of salvation as marked by deeds such as those that Jesus is doing. The beatitude is a warning to the Baptist not to disbelieve because his expectations have not been met.

Matthew 11:6 *who takes no offense*: The Greek verb is *skandalizō* which can mean to ‘cause to stumble’ or ‘cause to take offense.’ The latter is preferred here because it expresses the theme of the next several chapters in which people do take offense at him (ch. 12).

Matthew 11:7 *reed swayed by the wind*: The word reed (*kalamos*) refers to tall, hollow grasses growing in shallow water near the Jordan River. The question may ask (a) what were you going to see? The landscape or the prophet? Alternatively, (b) the question may imply a contrast between the flexible reeds and the unbending prophet. A third explanation is possible: (c) the reed appears on coins minted under Herod Antipas – thus comparing the unbending John and his jailer Herod.

Matthew 11:8 *fine clothing...in royal palaces*: Compares and contrasts John and Herod, but also echo the prophetic dress of John (3:4) as the antithesis of such finery.

Matthew 11:9 *a prophet...more than a prophet*: In common Jewish belief there had been no prophecy in Israel since the last of the Old Testament prophets, Malachi. The coming of a new prophet was eagerly awaited, and Jesus agrees that John was such. Yet he was *more than a prophet*, for he was the precursor of the one who would bring in the new and final age. The Old Testament quotation is a combination of Malachi 3:1; Exodus 23:20 with the significant change that the “before me” of Malachi becomes “before you.” The messenger now precedes not God, as in the original, but Jesus.

Matthew 11:10 *he will prepare your way before you*: This passage is taken from Mal 3:1 and points forward to that same “he” in Malachi 4:5. That verse eventually became a fundamental part of Jewish eschatological expectation that the literal Elijah would return from heaven to prepare for the coming of the Messiah. The oldest known text to reflect this hope predates the Christian era by two centuries (Sir. 48:10), though no specific reference to the Messiah appears in this context. At least in the later rabbinic literature it is clear that Mal. 3:1 and 4:5 were connected, so that the messenger in the former text was equated with Elijah in the latter (e.g., *Tg. Ps.-J. Num. 25:12*). A late midrash also links Exod.

23:20 with Mal. 3:1 because of the similar language: God's pattern of sending special messengers recurs (*Exod. Rab.* 32.9).

Matthew 11:11 none greater than John: John's preeminent greatness lies in his function of announcing the imminence of the kingdom (Matthew 3:1). **yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he:** to be in the kingdom is so great a privilege that the least who has it is greater than the Baptist.

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