

Prophecies: fulfilled or fulfilling? Sermon at St James for Advent 3

Readings

OT Isaiah 35 v 1-10

Epistle James 5 v 7-10 [not read]

Gospel Pt 1 Mt 11 v 2-11

This is the second week running that we have heard tales relating to John the Baptist but this week the focus shifts from his prophecy to whether or not it was by being fulfilled in the person of Jesus.

John is now in prison for daring to criticize King Herod and he sends his disciples to ask Jesus a very reasonable question

'Are you the one to come or should we expect someone else?' (v3)

Their leader had put the expected messiah on a pedestal of OT prophecy. John and his disciples would probably have been familiar with today's words of Isaiah, which included: "Your Lord will come with vengeance, with divine retribution he will come to save you (v 4b)";

"a highway will be there----the unclean will not journey on it; it will be for those who walk in that way; wicked fools will not go about on it (v 8)." Luke had come to a similar conclusion, inferring that in any messiah worth his salt would

'gather the wheat into his barn but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire (3 v17)'.

Rumours had already begun to circulate that Jesus didn't fit the prophetic mould; indeed, he was a bit of a softie. A few verses on in Mt 11 (v 19), Jesus' critics were saying

'The Son of man is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners'

There was no fire without smoke: Jesus freely accepted hospitality from those considered to be beyond the pale, beyond redemption, sinners all: the 'wicked people' who Isaiah's God had a beady eye on. Pious Jews held their noses lest traces of such conduct contaminated the air that they breathed. So, John's followers, like today's political journalists, wanted a straight answer to a straight question? Is this it? Are you He? 'Yes' or 'No'?

They did not get a straight answer. Had Jesus said 'Yes', the critics would probably have said 'Well he would say that wouldn't he'. Instead, Jesus simply says report to John what you hear and see about the sick being healed and the poor uplifted. The words are well chosen because they are things that Isaiah said would happen when God chose to re-establish peace and justice on earth

(35 v 5-6). As Mt goes on to say (in 11 v 19) 'wisdom is proved right by her actions'.

But the whole of Isaiah's prophecy was **NOT** being fulfilled. Jesus was highly selective in what he quoted. Conspicuous by their absence is any reference to vengeful divine separation of good from bad, holy from unholy. Jesus says-in effect-this is all you need to know about me and my highway-
it is sufficient: "blessed is the man who does not fall away because of me (v 6)").

Jesus then turns to address the crowds who were flocking to hear John's predictions. We are not told whether John's disciples were convinced by Jesus' reply or how their report went down with the imprisoned John: for Jesus and/or Matthew, it didn't matter; it was no big deal. What mattered was whether those that heard Jesus' words joined him on his highway by copying his actions. Before we leave the past behind, there are two things to note about the prophecies we have heard and whether or not they were being completed: their inclusivity and location. Fulfillment is not just about one man, Jesus, being put on a pedestal and waiting to be joined, either in a few centuries time or much sooner, by an elite in heaven. Isaiah talks about a highway being walked by many on the return to Zion: there are many feet, and they are firmly on this earth. Bearing in mind that where Matthew always talks about the kingdom of heaven, Luke talks about the kingdom of God, and Jesus may have preferred the title 'son of man' or 'humanity', when Jesus says some will come after him who put John in the shade (v 11), he could well have been referring to his own disciples and those that followed them here on earth, including us: in fulfilling prophecy, their impact would be greater than The Baptist's!

So, on this 3rd Sunday in Advent, having lit a candle and contemplated whether Jesus' was the fulfillment of John's and Isaiah's prophecies, let's remember two things: firstly, prophets and prophecies- important as they are- are subordinate to delivery, fulfillment, and completion.

Secondly, we are God's delivery service: Jesus' 'white van men and women'; we are expected to deliver the goods. But here's the rub! Outsiders might reasonably ask of us as John's disciples asked of Jesus "are you what we are to expect of Christians and their assemblies: is this it"?

Are those fumbling through life shown a clear path?

Are the disabled given the support of our stronger limbs?

Are the voiceless poor given a shout?

Are the sick just left in ever-lengthening queues?

Do we sway with the materialist, egocentric wind like everyone else?

Our judgement and response to the birth we are about to celebrate matters. Incarnation is not fulfillment: it is not a done deal, and we must do more than change the colour to suit the season, historicise prophecy, briefly put a babe instead of a crucified Christ on a pedestal and say,

'Thank you God for doing what you did all those years ago'. This is to put a pedestal on Jesus and drive his mission into the ground. It may be the way an alpha male church had always seen things and done things, but Jesus is Alpha and Omega, beginning and end. Jesus did not come to save a privileged elite but to unite all in creating a new heaven and a new earth. He is the fulcrum on which fulfillment pivots, but it is as yet incomplete: it is for us who claim to follow him to deliver and complete. There are voices crying in the current wilderness (like Brian McLaren's in 'Do I Stay Christian) that point out that if we can persuade all nations to work together and reverse global warming, the poetic language of Isaiah would not be out of place:

*'Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy;
Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert.
The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs.
In the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow'.*

Neville