

St Botolph's Church Worthing

11th December 2016

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Matthew 11: 2-11

Last Sunday we heard about John the Baptist calling God's people to repentance and proclaiming that their long expected Messiah was coming. John's expectation was that the Messiah - the Christ - would judge the sins of the people and destroy the unrepentant sinners but this did not happen. Rather, Jesus went among sinners preaching and healing and Herod threw John into prison because he had preached against his immorality in marrying his brother's wife. Poor John began to have doubts. Had he identified the wrong person? For Jesus was not doing what John expected - 'baptising with the Holy Spirit and with fire'. So he sends his disciples with the question 'are you the one who is to come, or do we look for another?' Jesus' answer is to quote Isaiah's prophecy of what the Messiah the Lord's anointed one, will do. This shows that he has fulfilled it 'the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the good news is preached to the poor'.

John need have no doubt and, of course, with these words Jesus is proclaiming to those who have ears to hear just as he did when he quoted the same prophecy in the synagogue at Nazareth. He is proclaiming to those who have ears to hear, just as he did when he quoted the same prophecy in the synagogue at Nazareth. He is proclaiming that he is the promised Messiah - it is a pivotal moment in the Gospel story. Jesus has a message for John's disciples, for the crowd surrounding him and for those who had rejected him in his home town of Nazareth: 'blessed' he says, 'is the man who does not fall away in to the sin of unbelief because of me'. As John's disciples leave to report Jesus' words to him Jesus gives them an affirmation about John - also from Old Testament prophecy in the book of Malachi, where God, prophesying the Coming of his Son into the world says 'I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you'. That messenger is John and he has prepared the way for Jesus. We do not know if John was reassured by Jesus' words. We can but hope that he recognises his place in God's plan for our salvation before he was beheaded by Herod.

John had played his part: he was, says Jesus, the most important person to have been born before him. What a claim to make! Greater than Abraham, greater than David, greater than all the prophets who came before him. Greater because he didn't just prophesy that Jesus would come - he was the one to introduce him to God's people and to

the world. Yet, says Jesus, 'he who is least in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than John'. Whatever does he mean? He is speaking of the salvation, which his death on the cross will open to mankind and the eternal life, which his resurrection prefigured.

The people of the Old Testament - even Abraham, David and the prophets - could never be totally certain that their sins were forgiven. Their animal sacrifices were not enough and, although they might see it through eyes of prophecy, they lived before the one time sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross enabled the guilt for our sins to be borne by him so that we might know true forgiveness. Also, they had no concept of the glory of heaven to which the risen Jesus was going. If they had any faith in an afterlife it was of a gloomy, shadowy existence in Sheol. Those who by faith in Jesus embrace salvation and eternal life are clearly greater than those who had no such hope, for Christian believers are part of the Kingdom of heaven. We see in the verses we heard a definite switch from the Old Testament to the New Testament. That's why they are such central texts, but what does all this mean for us, seeking to lead the Christian life here in Advent 2016. It says to us, 'hold on to your faith in all circumstances be blessed because you do not fall away knowing that even under the hardest trials God has made us a promise that he will never allow us to be tested beyond what we are able to bear. When we want to let go of faith and trust in God because of the burdens, sadness and tribulations that life lays upon us, we must hear God saying "hold on, you can bear this". He might take us right up to the line. But he will never take us over what we can bear with his strength. This is really hard but it is a fundamental promise of the Christian life. We are also hearing this Reading in Advent because, although John the Baptist might have been wrong about the permanence of judgment by Jesus Christ, this does not mean it did not happen. Advent is bringing before us God's prophecies that Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead. We will some day be judged and Jesus will be looking first at our faith in him and then at the way in which we lived out this faith in our lives. As the letter of James tells us baldly 'faith without works is dead'. Jesus' words to John the Baptist's disciples in our Reading are saying to them 'believe' and then he is saying to the crowd around him 'belief changes you and you will be blessed with all God's richest blessings of forgiveness and eternal life. You will be blessed if you do not fall away from living out your faith.' He is saying just the same to us - 'you believe in me: let your lives reflect the love of God for his world. Do it because you love me, but be aware that one day you will stand before my judgment seat.'

AMEN

