

expectation
a sermon preached on the
third sunday of advent
11 December 2016
at
st john's
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
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the lections: Isaiah 35:1-10; Song of Mary; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11

Advent Three's great spiritual motif is expectation. "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"¹ John the Baptist asks this question of Jesus from his prison cell. What is John's expectation? Why does it matter? Why is expectation so important? Why is it the burning question in Matthew's gospel?²

We all know about expectation. From the banal through to the sublime, expectation is like the engine room of our lives. Expectation is closely related to the mechanism by which we desire what the other has; what has been called mimetic rivalry. And because of this fact, expectation is exploited relentlessly – greedily and cruelly – by advertising and marketing industries. Consumer behaviour betrays our vulnerability to this wanting what others have, which so shapes our own expectations.

Jesus of Nazareth arouses tremendous expectations. These expectations do not suddenly appear out of nowhere; but arise from centuries of Jewish expectation for a new kingdom. We remember that this expectation goes back to that time when the people had decided that being God's chosen people was not enough for them; demanding that they must have a king, like all the other nations around them.³

To be like others: this is mimetic rivalry in action. What the other has, drives the attempt to copy them, which fuels rivalry, inevitably leading to violence.

The presence of Jesus excites the crowds and all who long for something better for Israel. His teachings and healings having activated expectations, the Baptist speaks for all: "Are you the one who is to come?" Is this the *Christos*, the Messiah? For many centuries the faithful Jew had been praying with expectation: 'Come, Lord!' We express this longing in our Advent prayer: *Maranatha!* Come Lord!

What is the expectation? What is *John's* expectation? What is the *crowd's* expectation? What is *our* expectation? What is the expectation of 'baby Jesus, meek and mild' at this time of year? Does Jesus fulfil our expectations?

Matthew's answer is both yes, and no. "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleaned, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them."⁴ These are signs of the messianic age as foretold by the prophets; an age of compassion and mercy and justice.

The eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy...
No lion shall be [on God's Holy Way],
nor shall any ravenous beast come upon it.⁵

But why does John doubt? For that matter, why do we doubt? This points to one the great spiritual issues. "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at?"⁶ The problem is that Jesus fails to meet expectations. "Save yourself!" we will read at the end, "If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross".⁷ Jesus does *not* fulfil the criteria of conquering hero. The Romans will *not* be overthrown. Jesus' 'kingdom' is nothing like what became empire and

¹ Matthew 11:3

² Brendan Byrne, *Lifting the Burden: Reading Matthew's Gospel in the Church Today*, Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2004, p91.

³ 1 Samuel 8:6ff

⁴ Matthew 11:4-5

⁵ Isaiah 35:5-6,9

⁶ Matthew 11:7

⁷ Matthew 27:40

‘Christendom’. The expectation of greatness, power, popularity, numbers, wealth, and so on, is not fulfilled by Jesus. Centuries of Christendom power and influence have blinded us to this fact of our origins; and the fact of the spiritual truth at the centre of Christian teaching.

Mired under the dead weight of mimetic desiring what the other has, our expectations are a function of what our tradition calls the old humanity – the humanity that Jesus’ birth announces is over. The Johannine insight is helpful at this point. Facing Pilate’s interrogation, Jesus declares, “My kingdom is not from this world”.⁸ This statement has nothing to do with extra-terrestrial speculation; rather, it’s a way of speaking about the new humanity, no longer in the grip of mimetic rivalry, thus with transfigured expectations.

From the old point of view, all progress is proved by historical success. From the new point of view, [however,] inner success may coincide with outer failure; spiritual evolution may express itself in physical suffering. A blind man may learn to see with his inner eye, though his physical senses remain sightless. Someone may enter spiritual life by dying physically.⁹

James’s ‘judge who is standing at the doors’¹⁰ is probably not the judge James expects; instead, the non-violent forgiving victim. Though John is a great prophet, even “the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he”.¹¹ For John and his supporters are longing for the Messiah, yes; but his expectations are those of the old humanity – which is why he doubts, and sends a questioning deputation to Jesus.

Matthew answers the question with Advent insight: “Wait until you feel like a babe in the outer world; then, if the inner babe, the Son of man, appears within you, his identity with the Spirit of [the *Christos, Messiach*] will be beyond doubt.”¹² For “wisdom is vindicated by her deeds”.¹³ “Let anyone with ears listen!”¹⁴

Advent is precious time, for re-assessing our expectations, based as they are on outer measures; for re-centering, re-grounding our expectation on the inner babe, allowing our mimetic expectations to be brought to light, by the Human One who is coming to birth, to be transformed. And blessed is the person who can accept all this.¹⁵

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⁸ John 18:36

⁹ John A Sanford, *Creation Continues: A Psychological Interpretation of the Gospel of Matthew*, New York: Paulist Press, 1987, p145.

¹⁰ James 5:9

¹¹ Matthew 11:11

¹² John A Sanford, p147

¹³ Matthew 11:19

¹⁴ Matthew 11:15

¹⁵ Matthew 11:6