

Saint Thomas and Saint Thomas of the Air Church  
 Third Sunday in Advent  
 December 15, 2024  
 rmceely+

... who at thy first coming didst send thy messenger to prepare thy way before thee;

On this Third Sunday in Advent

As we contemplate the coming of our Lord  
 The Church directs us to consider John, the Baptist.

He is a stark and almost shocking figure.

In appearance, primitive  
 In habitation, rudimentary  
 In speech blunt, even harsh and menacing.

Why the focus on him and why now?

John was Jesus' cousin or actually, second cousin.  
 He was born some months before the Birth of Jesus  
 To Zacharias and Elizabeth, Mary's cousin.  
 And he filled a crucial space between  
 the Old and New Testaments.

The last words of the Old Testament are in Malachi  
 In which the appearance of the Messiah  
 Is prophesied to be marked by the return of Elijah.

Then

Nothing.  
 For 400 years not a word.  
 Not a prophet.  
 Nothing.

The Jews waited for all that time.

Praying and wondering when the Messiah  
 would come to save them.

Can we imagine their anxiety. Had God abandoned them?

Then, this mysterious man appears in the desert  
 Not far from where Elijah preached  
 Not far from where he was assumed into heaven.  
 He looked like they remembered Elijah looked.  
 He lived in the wilderness  
 Ate locusts and honey to survive.  
 Just as Elijah had.

The ancient prophesy from as far back as Isaiah  
 Had foretold the return of one who would herald  
 the arrival of the Messiah.  
 A voice of one crying in the wilderness;  
 “prepare ye the way of the Lord.  
 Make straight in the desert a highway for our God”.

Was John that voice crying in the wilderness?  
 Was it all about to begin after 400 years?  
 Was John, the embodiment of Elijah?

Was John the last word of the Old Testament  
 And the first word of the New?  
 Was he the bridge that filled the gap?  
 The herald of what was about to take place?  
 Was he the final prophet?

The Church takes us back 2000 years  
 To the cell that contained John, the Baptist.  
 He has given one blistering, direct, honest and scathing  
 Sermon too many.  
 He had called out the King’s transgression  
 His marriage to his brother’s wife, Herodias.  
 Accurately pointing the finger at them  
 And their adultery.

Monarchs then, like people in power today,  
Did not brook the castigation of underlings  
And Herod Antipas  
Had John arrested and thrown into a cell.  
But the cell was not like any cell of today.  
It was a deep hole in the ground  
With vertical high walls  
A dirt floor  
With the only egress, a rope in the hands of the jailer.

Food when there was any,  
Was rotten  
Water was stagnant  
It is dark,  
It's wet.  
It's foul.  
Human waste is mingled with the dirt floor.  
The very air you breathe is putrid.  
Visitors come only at the whim of the jailers.  
And at the price of bribery.

There was no trial,  
no sentence,  
no lawyers,  
no judge, no jury  
no rights,  
no hope.

Even John, who baptized Jesus  
Is in despair.  
He has only time and perhaps too much of that.

From the bottom of that filthy pit  
In his dark and hopeless despair,  
Had John lost his faith? Was Jesus the One after all?

He must know what was happening.

What of Jesus?

Is He truly the One?

Has John's life's work been for naught?

Is it complete, or must he press on somehow?

John sends his emissaries to ask Jesus the critical question:

Are you The One?

Jesus does not give a direct answer.

Instead He reaches back 600 years, to Isaiah's prophecy

And lists the things that Isaiah said would be the signs.

The blind received their sight

The lame walk

The lepers are cleansed

The deaf hear

The dead are raised up

And the poor have the Gospel, the good news, preached to them.

There could be no greater confidence.

The ancient prophecies were fulfilled.

Jesus is the One.

We can only surmise John's reaction when his emissaries returned

With the news.

Do we, stewards of the mysteries of God,

in the times of our own pit of despair

Ask ourselves the same question:

Is Jesus The One?

In those times we are as assured, as was John,

By the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophesy.

But Jesus was not done.

He issues this enigmatic proclamation:

"blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in Me."

That word “offended” gives us pause.

The person who is not offended in Jesus is blessed?

In the Greek, the word translated in 1611 as “offended”

Also meant a stumbling block.

Something that impeded you

Got in your way.

So another way of saying it is this:

Blessed are those who do not get tripped up

By what Jesus is saying and doing.

For John the message is: understand the miracles

The blind recovering their sight

The deaf can hear

The lame walk

The dead are made alive.

Understand all of that

But do not get tripped up by it

The miracles are wonderful

But they are only pointing you to the real

The marvelous truth

Jesus is the One

The One who will save all mankind

The One who will defeat death

And offer eternal life.

Blessed is anyone who understands what God come to earth is truly about.

Today as we contemplate the Advent message we might say:

Blessed is anyone who can see past the glitter

The gift giving. The trees, the ornaments,

The lights and the symbols that our society has put up

Blessed is anyone who is not tripped up or distracted,

And who understands what “God with Us”

Truly means in our lives.

What the Nativity  
God becoming man  
Would accomplish for all mankind.

The marvelous truth is that God became Man  
On that clear cold night in Bethlehem  
To restore us to God  
To save us all  
To defeat death  
To bring us to everlasting life

God With Us.  
We are truly blessed.