

Jesus the Liberator (not the Judge!)

At the peak of his ministry, John the Baptist was this free, desert-roaming Jewish prophet. And because there had been no prophet in Israel for nearly four hundred years, John naturally attracted a lot of attention. But the message he proclaimed was that God was upset with his people, and that God was about to intervene dramatically in Israel's history, calling Jews and Gentiles alike to change not just their lifestyles, but their hearts as well.

Now, many of the common folk found John's words hopeful and full of promise, but many of those who were in position of power – and not just civic leaders, but religious as well – found his words challenging and unsettling. But, because John was extremely popular with the people, those in authority felt like they had to tolerate his presence. However, when the Jewish king Herod Antipas married his divorced sister-in-law – which, incidentally, is an act not permitted under Jewish religious law – John the Baptist had the nerve to describe that union as illegal and immoral. And though the religious leaders were reluctant to move against John, the king certainly was not, and John quickly found himself thrown into prison.

And so, on this third Sunday in Advent, our gospel reading picks up from last week, and we find John the Baptist in jail, wanting to know more about this Jesus of Nazareth.

In all honesty, just about the only difference between John in his prison cell, and any of us within this society in which we live, is that there was no doubt in John's mind that he was a prisoner. Unlike many of us, John does not suffer under the illusion that he is the master of his destiny. John knows that there is no reason for hope inside Herod's prison, no matter how good he tries to make it seem. But John still knows that another world exists; that there is another realm, another way out. And John wants to be released.

According to Matthew's gospel, when John heard what Jesus was doing – and I'm sure what he was hearing reports of what people were saying about Jesus – he sent his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come? Are you the one I've been telling people about? Or are we to wait for another?" And whether we understand it or not, John's question is also our question. Although the bars and doors of our various prisons are not like those of John's prison cell, they are just as real, and just as binding. Only, for most of us, we have a hard time seeing our prisons for what they are. We have forgotten what freedom outside the walls is really like, and we have adapted our lives to simply bettering our condition behind bars, rather than opting for complete release.

That is why John the Baptist is our leading figure in the Advent drama this Sunday, because *Advent is for prisoners*. Advent is for people who need and want emancipation. And even though, according to the words of Jesus, that there is no one greater than John, even he still needs

to be liberated. And so do we; no matter how “together” we try to appear to the world around us. Advent is for people who want to know, and experience, what life is like outside the prison of our world. Advent is for people, in other words, who hear about this Jesus, and want to know if he is the one to bring them this freedom – the one to bring them a quality of life and being that cannot be found within the confines of the world.

Now, imagine, if you will, that we’re in a shopping mall crowded with Christmas shoppers. We enter a large department store and begin browsing through the many items on display. A salesperson moves quickly to our side.

“May I help you?” she asks.

“Yes, I hope so,” we respond. “You see, I’m looking for the perfect gift, for myself.”

“I’m sure I can help you,” she says, ‘what do you have in mind?’

“A Christ,” we answer. “I’m looking for a Christ, for Christmas.”

“You’ve come to the right place. Please follow me,” she says, and she leads us to a very special section of the store.

“Here we have a number of fine models from which you might choose. On your left there, is the ever popular Beanie Baby Christ. He’s soft and cuddly, with no sharp edges or corners to hurt you. He’s guaranteed to warm your heart, and he comes at a price anyone can afford.

But when the salesperson senses our hesitation, she directs our attention to another shelf.

“Or maybe you would prefer our Hulk Hogan Christ. He’s one macho dude who will always protect you, and keep you safe from any earthly foe who might come against you. And is he ripped; check out those abs!

“Then, of course, there’s the Star Wars Christ; the Force is strong with this one. He will always protect you and keep you safe from any and all spiritual forces of evil and darkness throughout the universe. Even with his eyes closed.

Still, though, we pause, because it’s so hard to choose. “Finally, and considerably less-violent, is the Apple Macintosh’s iChrist. (This is so much better than Microsoft’s iGod; that one’s always crashing and needing to be rebooted. And getting it to work with your peripherals? Don’t get me started!) Anyway, I think you’ll find that the iChrist is very useful and sophisticated. He’s plays a mean game of solitaire, he can organize your personal finances, he can teach you different languages, and he can answer all your questions and solve all your daily problems; and all at the touch of a button. No, not that button.”

Though still uncertain, we make our decision: “I’ll take one of each.”

Now, I’ll grant you that it’s a ridiculous scenario, but isn’t there a germ of truth in it? Wouldn’t we all like to be able to pick and choose the manner in which Christ can come into our lives? However, the truth of the matter is this: Christ cannot be not found in a department store, and he is not available in a variety of models from which we might select the one most pleasing to us. The only true Christ refuses to conform to some image we may have of him, or fit some blueprint that we have designed for him to follow. Instead, his promise is that he will re-make and re-mold us into his image, and to renew our lives with his Spirit. This is the Christ who cannot be bought but, rather, who gives himself to us, and for us, freely.

John the Baptist sent his disciples to ask Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come? Or are we to wait for another?” Matthew’s gospel tells us that Jesus’ response to John’s question was to say: “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.”

While we don’t know what John’s response was to this message, this we do know: This was probably *not* what John was expecting of God’s Messiah. It’s pretty clear, from last Sunday’s gospel reading, that John fully expected the role of God’s Messiah to be that of a condemning judge. Remember what John said: “Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. He will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” Well, in a dramatic contrast to John’s expectations, Jesus revealed his role as God’s Messiah to be that of a liberator – healing the sick, raising the dead, and bringing good news to the poor.

What’s your prison like? Where, in your life, is there darkness and despair? Where, in your life, do you need a miracle? That’s the place where Jesus will come to meet you. That’s the promise of Advent. Advent is not for those who, mistakenly, believe that they have already succeeded. Nor is it for those who believe that they have mastered themselves, and the world around them. Advent is for prisoners. Advent is for those who know they need a Messiah, a Liberator, a Deliverer. Advent is for those who know that they need only the One who is “Christ the Lord.” In other words, Advent is for us.

In the end of it all, John the Baptist died in his prison. The promise of Advent is this: the same need not happen to us. Amen.