

Feb. 19, 2017

Luke 7:18-23

In the Bible, in all four gospels, the relationship between John the Baptist and Jesus is rather intriguing. On the one hand, John baptizes Jesus and serves as his herald. On the other, John seems a bit confused by Jesus' actual ministry, as if he didn't quite expect Jesus to do the things he did.

So, in today's reading from Luke's Gospel, John sends messengers to ask, point blank: *are you the one*. Not only that, but he's clearly prepared for a disappointing outcome: *or should we wait for another?* It would appear, here, that John's confidence has waned. I think it's likely that there was a note of pathos, even desperation, in John's voice as he asked this question. For so long, he had waited, worked, hoped, announced.... Can't you feel his pain, as he wonders, "Was it all in vain?"

In Luke's Gospel, John's somewhat desperate questioning is all the more striking because it's Luke who narrates that John and Jesus are actually cousins. So, naturally, we might presume some familiarity, some love between them. But now, into this familial, loving relationship, for John, there seeps the element of confusion, concern, and doubt. *Are you the one, or should we wait for another?*

While John's confusion is interesting, more than this, I think that it might also be instructive. Because, if John – the forerunner and herald of the messiah – is not quite sure what to make of Jesus, then we should probably not be surprised that no one else is either. Indeed, throughout his ministry Jesus constantly defies expectations; redefines what it means to be God's messiah; and, surprises people – sometimes to their delight, but often to their confusion and consternation.

And this leads me to wonder if maybe we've domesticated Jesus down through the years. I wonder. Are we so comfortable with Jesus that he no longer surprises us, concerns, confuses, even vexes us? If this is so, then perhaps we've

not really been paying attention. If you only ever want Jesus and his gospel message to go down easy, like Mary Poppins' *a spoonful of sugar*, you'll be sorely disappointed, I'm afraid. Sometimes it can seem that Jesus and his gospel message are more like *Buckley's Mixture*, right? *It tastes awful, but it works.*

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

“For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.”

“Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you.”

“Do unto others – all others – as you would have them do unto you.”

One thing that today's reading from the Gospel of Luke says to me is this: “Allow Jesus and his gospel message to trouble you, challenge you, re-orientate you and your life – its goals, hopes, and expectations – much as did happen for his beloved cousin John.”

A second element that has struck me in this exchange between Jesus and John, facilitated through the question brought to Jesus by two of John's disciples, is the answer that is given by Jesus. Did you notice that he offers John neither comfort in his confusion and concern, nor arguments to persuade him to believe? Instead, all Jesus does is point to the effects of his ministry – effects, by the way, that echo the promises he had made in that first sermon he preached to the folks – neighbours, friends, and some enemies he made – in his hometown of Nazareth. Remember how he said: “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them.”

In other words, Jesus' status and authority, his very identity, are made most clear in his determined commitment to stand for life and all that supports it; and, consequently, to stand against all that would rob the children of God – any and all children of God – of that abundant life which God, and Jesus, long to give them.

I don't know. Maybe this is not what John expected in a Messiah. Maybe this is not what those in Jesus' day looked for either. Maybe they wanted someone who would run the Romans out of Israel, or bring Herod to justice, or usher in an era of peace and prosperity. And maybe it's not what we expect either. Maybe we look for someone who will keep our country or our church just as is or as it was in the 1950's, or who will protect us in our times of trial or even from ever having to go through any trials, or who will validate our Canadian values "as is" and bless our current lifestyles. Or, maybe we look for someone who will answer all our prayers; especially the ones for which we already know the answer we want and demand.

Who knows? What we do know is that Jesus testifies that his ministry, mission, and relationship to God are made manifest in his actions that demonstrate the favour of God for the last and the least, the lost and the lonely of this world by standing for life, health, healing, inclusion, and wholeness for all. "And," as he says, "blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me."

Blessed is anyone, then or now, who takes no offense at the One – indeed, who takes no offence at anyone – who feeds the poor and challenges the rich, who shelters the homeless and denies that anyone needs more than one house, who stands with the marginalized and oppressed in society and against those who have a death grip on the status quo, who welcomes the refugee and does not turn their back on the stranger – for this one is and this one lives the good news ministry and message of Jesus Christ our Lord.

At first, it does *taste awful; but it works*. So we must develop a palate for it – for this person, ministry and gospel of Jesus Christ – and get on with it. Else we might languish forever, in our confusion, doubt and consternation, asking of him: “*Are you the one, or are we to wait for another?*” For God’s sake, and for God’s people’s sake, let us wait no longer.

Tom Long recounts this story as told by Anglican minister, George Ross, concerning a woman in one of Ross’s congregations. This particular woman was having terrible difficulty getting over the loss of her husband. Desperate, fearful and confused, she went to her physician and said: “You need to give me a prescription to help me with my despondency. Every day I go to the cemetery and put flowers on my husband’s grave, but it doesn’t help. It simply drives me deeper into grief. Give me a prescription to ease my pain.” The doctor listened carefully, and then he said: “Before I give you a prescription, let me give you a suggestion. Instead of placing those flowers on your husband’s grave, why don’t you bring them to the hospital? I have many patients in hospital who get no visitors. If you would visit them, bring them some encouragement and those flowers, it may be that you would bring a little joy into their lives.” Even though she was resistant, at first, the woman decided to do it and found that this was the turning point of her own healing. As she showed encouragement to others, she was able to drink deeply from the well of God’s own encouragement.

Shortly, friends, we will sing the following words as composed by the hymn writer Fred Kann. I wonder if we ought to sing them if we do not also intend, by the grace of God, to commit ourselves to living them boldly

To Show by Touch and Word

- 1 To show by touch and word devotion to the earth,
to hold in full regard all life that comes to birth,

we need, O God, the will to find
the good you had of old in mind.

- 2 Renew our minds to choose the things that matter most,
our hearts to long for truth till pride of self is lost.
For every challenge that we face
we need your guidance and your grace.
- 3 Let love from day to day be yardstick, rule, and norm,
and let our lives portray your word in human form.
Now come with us that we may have
your wits about us where we live.

Are you and I the ones for whom some person, somewhere, is waiting
waiting for us to come to them as a caring, loving, bold, and committed follower of
Jesus; or, are they to wait for another?

What do you believe?