

Are you the One to come?



Image credit: *Christ Presenting the Keys to Saint Peter*, c. 1636-40, by Nicholas Poussin, Public Domain

² When John heard in prison of the works of the Messiah, he sent his disciples to him ³ with this question, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?” ⁴ Jesus said to them in reply, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵ the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them. ⁶ And blessed is the one who takes no offense at me.” ⁷ As they were going off, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John, “What did you go out to the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? ⁸ Then what did you go out to see? Someone dressed in fine clothing? Those who wear fine clothing are in royal palaces. ⁹ Then why did you go out? To see a prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ This is the one about whom it is written:

‘Behold, I am sending my messenger ahead of you;
he will prepare your way before you.’

¹¹ Amen, I say to you, among those born of women there has been none greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. (Matthew 11:2-11)

In the narrative flow

This coming Sunday is the [3rd Sunday in Advent](#), lectionary cycle A, and again John the Baptist features prominently in the gospel text. Where last week we encountered him as the herald of the Messiah, this week John has been arrested and is jailed. Before moving into the study, let’s consider where this story fits into the narrative flow of Matthew’s gospel - there has been a lot that has happened in the narrative flow between the two Sunday gospel readings.

A key phrase in the first verse of the gospel reading is the expression “works of the Messiah” (Mt 11:2). That forms an all encompassing summary of what Jesus has been doing in Matthew chapters 5–10. Along the way Jesus’ acts and teachings provoke different responses from different groups. These responses, most of which consist of misunderstanding if not outright rejection, are examined in chapters

11–12, and explained in the parables of chapter 13. Further examples of the response to Jesus will occur in chapters 14–16, until the true response is found in Peter’s confession in 16:13–20, which will bring the second main part of Matthew’s Gospel to its climax. This is the thread which runs through these chapters. Through them we are led from a view of Jesus as others saw him to the true confession of him as Messiah which eluded most of his contemporaries, conditioned as they were by their own assumptions or some inadequate ideas of the nature of the promised Messiah.

More immediately, this passage marks a transition. *“When Jesus finished giving these commands to his twelve disciples, he went away from that place to teach and to preach in their towns”* (Mt 11:1). With this one verse, Matthew signals the end of the missionary discourse (Mt 10) in 11:1 with nothing said about the disciples’ actual mission or their return (as in Luke 9). The spotlight remains on Jesus as he continues his work. The themes of unbelief and rejection that were so prominent in the missionary discourse are continued, but we are given more information about Jesus’ identity as the Messiah (11:1–6), the Wisdom of God (11:25–30), and the Servant of God (12:15–21) in the coming gospels.

That’s the context of the narrative flow, but this passage also has a liturgical context in its use as the Gospel of the 3rd Sunday in Advent, Gaudete Sunday. On the 2nd Sunday of Advent, our Gospel reading presented the preaching of John the Baptist. Near the end of that reading, Matthew portrays John, not only as a prophet, but as a forerunner to Jesus. John is quoted as speaking about *“the one who is coming after me,”* who *“is mightier than I”* (3:11), which makes that selection especially appropriate for Advent. On the 3rd Sunday of Advent this year, we read the episode in which John, already in prison, sends some of his disciples to ask Jesus, *“Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?”* (11:3). Jesus does not respond directly, but simply points out that he is doing the things Isaiah mentions in describing a time when people will experience God’s glory and splendor, restoration and salvation (alluding to Isa 35:1–6, the 3rd Advent Sunday’s first reading). It is this accent, in anticipation of its joyous fulfillment that gives Gaudete Sunday its focus.

In either its scriptural or liturgical focus, a key point is that if both prophet and Messiah have appeared, then their joint call to repentance (recall 3:2; 4:17) must be urgently heeded – be it John’s message unremittingly austere or Jesus also preaching the joy of the kingdom (11:16–19).

“Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?”

John’s arrest by King Herod was mentioned in 4:12, yet the full story of his imprisonment will wait until 14:3–12. No doubt the Baptist had anxiously followed the career of the one whom he had recognized as the *‘mightier one’* for whose coming he had prepared (3:11–12). And yet there is the question that John the Baptist sends with his disciples to ask of Jesus. Does the question strike you as odd? Shouldn’t the one who pointed to Jesus, saying, *“Behold the Lamb of God”*, be a little more sure about Jesus’ identity as the promised Messiah? Join the club: theologians, Church Fathers, and modern scholars have wrestled with the same question over the centuries.

John’s hesitation might have been simply a difference between his expectations for *‘the coming one’* and what he actually heard about Jesus and his ministry. Maybe the miracles are just fanciful stories? If Jesus is the Messiah, why doesn’t he fast like an observant Jew? And he keeps company with a cast of characters normally to be avoided.

Was John experiencing a crisis of faith or uncertainty about Jesus’ identity? John’s expectations of the Messiah may have leaned toward a judgmental, apocalyptic deliverer, as seen in his preaching (Mt 3:10–12: *“The axe is already at the root of the trees...”*). Jesus’ ministry, by contrast, emphasized healing, mercy, and forgiveness, not immediate judgment. Imprisoned and possibly facing death, John might have wondered why the Messiah had not yet acted to bring justice or vindicate him. This view emphasizes John’s humanity, not a lack of faith per se, but confusion in light of unfulfilled messianic expectations.

Maybe John himself was not doubting, but he sent his disciples so they might be convinced of Jesus' identity. John knew his disciples needed to see for themselves. By sending them to Jesus, John directs them to the true Messiah, transferring their loyalty from himself to Christ. In this case, Jesus' response ("*Go and tell John what you hear and see.*") is a teaching moment for the disciples more than a rebuke of John. This view preserves John's prophetic certainty and aligns with his earlier witness: "*He must increase, and I must decrease*" (Jn 3:3)

Prophets often posed questions to elicit revelation and John being a prophet might have deliberately posed this question to reveal Jesus' identity more fully, using the moment as a teaching device for his followers and whoever happened to be around when Jesus answered.

To be fair, before Easter, no one fully understood the Messiah's mission of suffering, redemption, and mercy. John's question, then, mirrors the broader tension in Second Temple Judaism between expectations of a conquering Messiah and the reality of a suffering servant. Jesus' answer, "*Blessed is the one who takes no offense at me,*" acknowledges this tension with compassion and understanding.

Another view is that John's question stands at the threshold between Law and Gospel. After all, John is the last prophet of the old order and seeking confirmation that "Day of the Lord" has arrived, to use the older prophetic expression, or as we would say, has the Kingdom of God arrived? St. Augustine cleverly frames this view as the "Law asking the Gospel" whether it has come in the fullness of revelation.

The Baptist, whose proclamation introduced Matthew's presentation of the Messiah (3:1–12), is now appropriately called as the first witness to the meaning of Jesus' ministry. Even if in a round about manner.

The Mission Being Revealed

The evidence to which Jesus points is not immediately conclusive, as it does not chime in with the popular (and probably John's) idea of the Messiah's work. But his words are an unmistakable allusion to passages in Isaiah which describe God's saving work (Isa. 35:5–6; cf. 29:18), and the mission of his anointed servant (Isa. 61:1). Six specifics are enumerated:

- the healing of blindness (cf. 9:27–28; 12:22; 20:30; 21:14),
- lameness (cf. 15:30–31; 21:14),
- leprosy (cf. 8:20),
- deafness (cf. 9:32–33; 12:22; 15:30–31);
- the raising of the dead (cf. 9:18; 10:8); and
- evangelism to the poor (cf. 4:14–17, 23; 5:3; Luke 4:18).

If these did not form part of the general expectation, and of John the Baptist's, they should have. In Jesus' own understanding of his mission, Isaiah 61:1–2 looms large. The relief of suffering, literally fulfilled in his healing miracles, reaches its climax in *good news to the poor*, the godly minority described in the beatitudes of chapter 5 (the '*ānāwīm*'). If this is too gentle a mission for John's Messianic hopes, he has missed the biblical pattern on which Jesus' mission is founded.

Jesus seems to understand the difference in messianic expectations and the true nature of the kingdom and so hopes that none *take offence* (v.6). This is the same verb (*skandalizō*) as in 5:29–30, 'be tripped up by' (see Notes below). Many were 'put off' by Jesus, when his style of ministry failed to tally with their expectations, and even offended against accepted conventions. '*Good news to the poor*' was an offence to the establishment, while a mission of the relief of suffering and the restoration of sinners would be at best irrelevant to those who fought for national liberation. It took spiritual discernment not to be 'put off' by Jesus, and such perception was enviable. *And blessed is the one who takes no offense*

at me – while it applies directly to John’s state of uncertainty, this beatitude is also a key to the theme of this section of the Gospel, which will introduce many who found Jesus hard to take.

Jesus’ View of John

“John wore clothing made of camel’s hair and had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. At that time Jerusalem, all Judea, and the whole region around the Jordan were going out to him” (John 3:4-5)

John’s preaching had created a sensation, and the movement *into the wilderness* had been a remarkable phenomenon. Jesus now examines its motives, to show the real significance of John. The series of three questions and answers suggests motives progressively closer to a true understanding of John. *A reed shaken by the wind* is a metaphor for a weak, pliable person; John was not such a person, and the implied answer is *‘Of course not’*. It was John’s rugged independence which attracted a following. Nor was he *dressed in fine clothing*; far from it. It was as a man conspicuously separate from the *royal palace*. (There may be an ironic reference to his present residence in a *‘royal palace’*—as a prisoner of conscience in Herod’s fortress) His rough clothing in fact points to his real role, as *a prophet*, and the crowds would gladly have accepted this description of John. But even that is not enough.

Tucked into the discussion of John the Baptist is an intriguing composite OT quotation. The disciples of John have returned to their imprisoned master with Jesus’ answer to their question about his identity. Jesus takes this occasion to comment on John to the crowds (11:7–19). He dispels the notion that John was a weak or pampered figure (11:7–8), declaring instead that he was a genuine prophet, *“and more than a prophet”* (11:9). In language reminiscent of earlier testimony concerning John (see 3:3), Jesus explains, *“This is the one about whom it is written* (a standard way of referring to Hebrew Scripture),

‘Behold, I am sending my messenger ahead of you; he will prepare your way before you.’ (Exodus 23:20) (Malachi 3:1)

In context, Exod. 23:20 refers to God sending his angel to guard the Israelites, as they proceed from Mount Sinai, to prepare the way for them to take possession of the promised land. But in both Greek and Hebrew, the same words can mean either “angel” or “messenger” (and angels typically function as messengers), so an application to a human messenger in a different context follows naturally.

The language of Exod. 23:20 recurs in Mal. 3:1. Malachi’s prophecy may in fact deliberately allude to the Exodus text. This time, however, the messenger seems to refer to a human being who will prepare the way for the Lord to come suddenly to his temple, a messenger who in Mal. 4:5 is equated with Elijah and described as one who *“will turn the fathers’ hearts toward their children”* (4:6), an example of the reconciliation that results from the kind of repentance for which John the Baptist had been calling.

Those born among women

“Amen, I say to you, among those born of women there has been none greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.” (Mt 11:11) This is an extraordinary statement balancing praise and paradox

“Born of women” is a Semitic idiom meaning any human being — all mortal humans. and Jesus has just declared John the greatest of all humans up to that point — greater than Abraham, Moses, David, or the prophets. He is the culmination of the prophets — *“the voice crying in the wilderness”* (Isa 40:3), the forerunner of the Messiah, bridging Old and New. He personally identifies the Lamb of God (Jn 1:29). He embodies austere holiness and prophetic courage, dying for truth and righteousness. In short: John is the final prophet of the Old Covenant, the greatest light before the dawning of the Messianic era.

And then there is the paradox. How can someone “greater than all” be “less than the least” in the kingdom? John belongs to the Old Covenant order. Yes, he announces the Kingdom, but does not yet live within it. He dies before Jesus’ passion, death, and resurrection — the saving events that inaugurate the new covenant and the kingdom of heaven in its fullness. Therefore, even the “least” person who shares in Christ’s redemptive grace possesses something John could only anticipate: participation in the divine life through the Spirit. Because of the greatness of the kingdom’s age, all of the kingdom’s citizens will in some sense be greater even than John.

Some Final Thoughts

The gospel for the 3rd Sunday in Advent is a transition point of Salvation History and easily is lost in our modern movement to Christmas. But here in this reading, John the Baptist stands at the threshold as the last and greatest herald of the Old Covenant, but not a participant in the new era of grace inaugurated by Christ. Jesus’ disciples, by following Him, are entering into something new as the Kingdom breaks into history.

Jesus is asking the disciples to themselves as participants in a divine kingdom, not merely hearers of prophecy. But participants in a kingdom where earthly standards (lineage, authority, power and position) are overturned. In the new kingdom greatness will be measured by grace, humility, and closeness to Christ. It is the start of a subtle preparation for the paradox of the Cross when the greatest of all appears in lowliness and suffering.

Jesus, in his way, says to the disciples, “don’t be discouraged by John’s imprisonment or question whether God’s plan is unfolding. Rather, be mindful of the privilege and responsibility of living in the age of grace.

In the context of Advent, this gospel helps establish the identity of Jesus – something especially key during the Advent Season. “Whose birth are we preparing for, anyway?” And this is as important a question for us in our day as it was in the life and time of John the Baptist.

Then as now I suspect Jesus would still not fit our messianic expectations, would fail to conform to our popular messianic expectations. Why? Then as now, and in keeping with Gospel tradition, our expectations of Jesus are probably mostly correct but almost certainly incomplete. We should not think ourselves immune from “hometown expectations.” In contrast to what Jesus did and said, many contemporary people harbor false or incomplete expectations about Christ that need correcting.

A friar priest, a friend of mine, holds that if one hasn’t been offended by the gospel that is Jesus, it is likely that one has an incomplete understanding of the gospel. A Jesus who is always comforting and never afflicting is an incomplete Jesus.

Notes

Matthew 11:2 *in prison*: see Matthew 4:12; 14:1-12. The works of the Messiah: the deeds of Matthew 8-9.

Matthew 11:3 *the one who is to come*: This is not known as a Messianic title in OT usage, however, Is 59:20 uses the same verbal construction to refer to God coming as Redeemer to Zion.

Matthew 11:4 *Jesus said...in reply*: Jesus does not answer directly rather telling John’s followers to report the things they have witnessed and heard. There are two possible understandings of such a response. (a) Jesus does the deeds of the Messiah (*cf.* 11:2) and his works answer John in the affirmative. (b) Jesus demands a reinterpretation of the signs by which the “*the one who is to come*” is to be discerned – i.e., by such deeds and not military conquests.

Matthew 11:5 *the blind regain....the poor have the good news proclaimed to them* Jesus' response is taken from passages of Isaiah (Isaiah 26:19; 29:18-19; 35:5-6; 61:1) that picture the time of salvation as marked by deeds such as those that Jesus is doing. The beatitude is a warning to the Baptist not to disbelieve because his expectations have not been met.

Matthew 11:6 *who takes no offense*: The Greek verb is *skandalizō* which can mean to 'cause to stumble' or 'cause to take offense.' The latter is preferred here because it expresses the theme of the next several chapters in which people do take offense at him (ch. 12).

Matthew 11:7 *reed swayed by the wind*: The word reed (*kalamos*) refers to tall, hollow grasses growing in shallow water near the Jordan River. The question may ask (a) what were you going to see? The landscape or the prophet? Alternatively, (b) the question may imply a contrast between the flexible reeds and the unbending prophet. A third explanation is possible: (c) the reed appears on coins minted under Herod Antipas – thus comparing the unbending John and his jailer Herod.

Matthew 11:8 *fine clothing...in royal palaces*: Compares and contrasts John and Herod, but also echo the prophetic dress of John (3:4) as the antithesis of such finery.

Matthew 11:9 *a prophet...more than a prophet*: In common Jewish belief there had been no prophecy in Israel since the last of the Old Testament prophets, Malachi. The coming of a new prophet was eagerly awaited, and Jesus agrees that John was such. Yet he was *more than a prophet*, for he was the precursor of the one who would bring in the new and final age. The Old Testament quotation is a combination of Malachi 3:1; Exodus 23:20 with the significant change that the "before me" of Malachi becomes "before you." The messenger now precedes not God, as in the original, but Jesus.

Matthew 11:10 *he will prepare your way before you*: This passage is taken from Mal 3:1 and points forward to that same "he" in Malachi 4:5. That verse eventually became a fundamental part of Jewish eschatological expectation that the literal Elijah would return from heaven to prepare for the coming of the Messiah. The oldest known text to reflect this hope predates the Christian era by two centuries (Sir. 48:10), though no specific reference to the Messiah appears in this context. At least in the later rabbinic literature it is clear that Mal. 3:1 and 4:5 were connected, so that the messenger in the former text was equated with Elijah in the latter (e.g., *Tg. Ps.-J. Num. 25:12*). A late midrash also links Exod. 23:20 with Mal. 3:1 because of the similar language: God's pattern of sending special messengers recurs (*Exod. Rab. 32.9*).

Matthew 11:11 *none greater than John*: John's preeminent greatness lies in his function of announcing the imminence of the kingdom (Matthew 3:1). ***yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he***: to be in the kingdom is so great a privilege that the least who has it is greater than the Baptist.

Sources

G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, UK: Baker Academic; Apollos, 2007) pp. 38-40

Eugene Boring, *The Gospel of Matthew* in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VIII (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994) pp. 266-68

Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A Sociopolitical and Religious Reading* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000) p. 249

R.T. France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary* in the Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, Vol. 1, ed. Leon Morris (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1989) pp. 195-98

Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 1 of *Sacra Pagina*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991) pp. 154-62

Daniel J. Harrington, “Matthew” in *The Collegeville Bible Commentary*, eds. Diane Bergant and Robert J. Karris (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1989) pp. 878

John P. Meier, *Matthew*, New Testament Message 3 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990) pp. 119-20

Brian Stoffregen, “Brian P. Stoffregen Exegetical Notes” at www.crossmarks.com

D. Turner and D.L. Bock, *Matthew and Mark* in the Cornerstone Biblical Commentary, vol. 11 (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2005) pp. 158-63

Dictionaries

G. Kittel, G. W. Bromiley & G. Friedrich, eds., *Theological dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995)

G. Stählin, *skandalizō*, 7:339–58