

Literal Expectations

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus asks not only John the Baptist and those who were following Him but also us, what are we expecting? The reading from Isaiah 35 was given for a people who would be in exile for generations and would know their native homeland, the Promised Land only from stories told to them. It speaks of a return to the land of their ancestors, a land once given to them by God. Did they expect to literally see the things described in this chapter of Isaiah, or was it understood to be a metaphor, indicating that there would be nothing to fear in the journey back to the Promised Land? In the same way, the expectations of the Messiah in John the Baptist's time were that the Messiah would restore the nation of Israel under a king from the line of David and it would once again be a free, independent nation. Whether this Messiah came as a prophet, warrior, king or great teacher, the expectation was still the same, that Israel would be restored to its former glory under King David.

But what happens when expectations are not met? For John the Baptist, it caused him to doubt. He was so certain that the Messiah would meet his expectations that he told others to watch out for the fire of judgement that this Messiah would brandish. But when it did not happen, John began to question, he began to doubt. So, as would anyone who had doubts, whose expectations were not met, John began to ask if Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah or if he should look for another person to be that Messiah. Instead of directly answering John's disciples if He was this Messiah, Jesus told them to open their ears and eyes, observing what Jesus was doing and saying. More importantly, Jesus was telling John's disciples to observe those whom Jesus had touched.

When God does not meet our expectations, doubts are raised within us also. While John was physically imprisoned, his doubts about Jesus also had him imprisoned spiritually. How do our doubts about Jesus put us in prison, doubts that may arise from expectations not being met? While one might initially think of times that brings about a "crisis of faith" that make us doubt, there are also more subtle ways that cause us to doubt, to wonder if Jesus is the "real deal" or not. Something as simple as wondering if the accounts of the Bible are actually true or not may cause doubt. Looking at all the bad things that are happening in the world today is enough to cause one to wonder about the existence of God at all. How can there be a God, much less a loving God, when there is all this suffering in the world? Encountering rude people in this season of peace and good cheer or even hearing gossipy things about others are other ways that may cause us to doubt Jesus' presence among us. Having a string of bad luck where it seems like we're living out an old country western song can make us doubt. There are many, many ways that we may doubt the identity of Jesus, each one putting up another bar to our spiritual prison. There are many other ways in which our spiritual prison gets more bars due to our expectations not being met, causing doubt.

By seeing how Jesus treated others who were hurting, we see that perhaps it is our expectations of God that need to be changed. Instead of having that shiny knight on a galloping steed striking down all the 'bad people' while saving all the 'good people' maybe we should look at the Messiah on a smaller scale - that is, we should see how the Messiah affects the hearts of those who are touched by Jesus. Instead of measuring the 'success' of Jesus by the literalness of the blind seeing, the lame walking, the deaf hearing, the lepers cleansed and the dead raised, what if we understood this to be more of a figurative understanding. If that is the case, then we could understand all those just mentioned as looking at the world

differently, from a different perspective. It is from this different perspective that we see that the Messiah comes to us in a different, yet just as profound way. This Messiah that God has given us has not come to compete on a stage where 'power makes right' where a game of king of the hill is the prevailing way of the world. Instead, Jesus comes to us in the most unassuming way possible. This Messiah came as a baby conceived out of wedlock, born in the most humblest of settings - in someone else's stable for animals. This Messiah that God has given us is one that gives us more than a new 'king of the hill' but gives us a Savior who defeats the enemy which we cannot defeat on our own - the enemy of the devil and death. This Messiah gets people to look at others and at things differently, with a viewpoint from their hearts. This fulfills the covenant promise that God made to the people through Jeremiah where God says that He will put the Lord's teachings on the people's hearts. When our hearts get changed by God, we see things differently, we approach things differently, we assess things differently.

It is in having our hearts changed that we are able to hear and see God's word differently. We can hear a word of hope in them. We can then hear the words of Isaiah as not being literal, but the establishment of God creating a better place for us. We can use the patience that James talks about in his letter to hope for a better world. Patience is more than just waiting - it is a waiting with a hope that something special will happen, something that does not necessarily need our participation to happen. This does not mean that we do nothing until that time comes, but it is a waiting where we do those things which we should be doing, actions from the heart.

In today's Gospel reading from Matthew, he tells us that Jesus is the Messiah. In some circles, it had been postulated that there was a 'Messianic secret' as to the identity of Jesus and that it was only over time that the people

learned that Jesus was actually the Messiah. Perhaps it is more of a secret of Messianic hope that is the real secret. That is, over time, God has revealed to the people that our expectations of the Messiah need to be not only changed, but also expanded. The expectations of the Messiah in Jesus' time were too limited, they only thought in terms of national independence. The hope that Jesus gives us a hope that goes far beyond national borders or national identity. The hope is that we become identified not by what someone else tells us we are, but what God tells us we are. This is a hope that encourages us to ask for world peace, knowing that someday, in some way, God will establish a peace over the whole world, a peace that is established in God's name. As we wait patiently wait for that time, we can experience that hope of the Messiah by letting the Holy Spirit change our hearts, so that we can see the world in a different way, a way of loving others for being a child of God. So, as we continue our Christmas preparations, let us not forget to prepare our hearts to see the world in a new way, raising our expectations of what God can and will do for us through Jesus.

YouTube links:

Gospel and Sermon: <https://youtu.be/Aod6hdih-tk>

Service: <https://youtu.be/qQYjcqQf6xc>