

SERMON : GEOFF CHADWICK

Date: 12/12/2004

Day: Advent 3

Congregation: Anglican Church

Scripture reference: Matt 11:2-11

Topic: EVEN JOHN THE BAPTIST WASN'T SURE

Today in Mtt's Gospel we read how, in a moment of imprisoned anxiety, John the Baptist is not sure if Jesus is really the one to be proclaimed. John sends his disciples to get the "good oil" on the fellow called Jesus. He tells them to ask: 'Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?' (Mitt 11:3, NIV).

Here we meet a moment of spiritual uncertainty. John's not sure and Jesus answers in his usual enigmatic way: "Go and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor." (Mitt 11:5, NIV). It is an indirect answer but with a clear message. The signs of God's new kingdom are indisputable. Nevertheless, it is a curiosity that here, towards the beginning of Mit's Gospel

there is some confusion over Jesus' identity. The implication is that it is possible to misidentify the work of God. Even John the Baptist gets it wrong. This, actually, is comforting to us because it allows us the freedom to get it wrong or fail to see the workings of God in our midst. The Gospel highlights just how easy it is to expect certain things from God that we miss what he actually is doing. As the old saying has it: "We can miss the wood for the trees".

We are not condemned for this, only encouraged to look again to "meet God again for the first time".

I would also suggest that John's worry over the identity of Jesus was fuelled By imprisoned anxiety. In prison, in the midst of lost freedom and abandoned hopes, Worry sets in.

Is this not normal?

Is it not the case that when we are imprisoned by the cares of this world we begin to worry, we lose our confidence and we wonder if we were right in the first place?

This is what imprisonment is. It boxes us into limited thinking and responses.

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I once had a student who at a very young age obviously learnt that the way to get her own way was to have a tantrum. Being successful by losing her temper had had its rewards for many years, but in a class of more mature adults it wasn't working anymore. It was time for her to learn new strategies and new skills. To learn things that were outside of her old "box". It wasn't easy for her, because she had been imprisoned by her own anxiety.

And so it is with us all. I'm sure we can all recount times when our own anxiety has imprisoned us just at the very time when we need to be looking beyond ourselves.

Now we also need to uncover the irony that lies under the surface of today's reading. It's easily missed unless you stop and read the text a little carefully.

- John the Baptist has missed the point and Jesus says: "the blind receive sight."
- John mis-hears whilst in prison, and Jesus says: "the deaf hear."
- John restricted in a prison cell, hears Jesus say: "The lame walk."
- John, awaiting execution, hears Jesus say: "The dead are raised."

And so, a gospel of Good News is preached even to John the Baptist!

It's almost as if Jesus is saying to John, *"your anxious imprisonment has blinded you, numbed you and maimed you. Now hear the good news again for the first time. Be not blind, be not dumb, be not maimed. See what's happening outside of your box, hear what is being said beyond your imagination, feel the movement of God that has no restrictions."*

Spiritual uncertainty is fine but look beyond it and the Good News will find you.

And so to us.

I wonder what anxieties are imprisoning you at the moment? What “boxes” are blocking your view of the Good News to the poor?

Maybe the general busy-ness of life has hemmed you in. Maybe someone's recently wronged you and you can't let it

go. Maybe you've recently done a dumb thing and you can't let that go either...

- Where we are blind to the good news; may we find it in our sights.
- Where we are deaf to the Good News may we hear it loud and clear.
- Where life has maimed us into inactivity; may the Good News call us into action.

"Are you the one who is to come?"

"You bet!"