



## GOSPEL GOSSIP

'Who do you say I am?'

St Matthew 11. 2-11

Sunday 14 December

This is now the third Sunday of Advent, and the Gospel reading focuses on John the Baptist. Now he has been imprisoned, and is no longer at the River Jordan baptising and calling people to repentance. Among those who presented themselves was Jesus. John recognised him for what he was, the Messiah, and drew people's attention to the fact. Now he's held captive, perhaps under a sort of house arrest as his followers were able to be in touch quite freely, and even Herod, who had had imprisoned, used to go and hear what he had to say.

We can imagine, though, the amount of time that John spent on his own, fearing the worst for his future. It is perfectly understandable were he to have doubts about the Messiah – was John correct in his identifying of Jesus? More probably, he wanted the human reassurance that we all yearn for, the certain knowledge of Jesus' presence. So he asks his followers to enquire of Jesus whether he really was the Messiah. And typically, Jesus gives an oblique answer. Jesus never asserts he is the Messiah outright; he leaves it to the questioners to answer their own questions, so Jesus gives John's followers a list of things that are associated with him and asks 'Who do you say I am?'

- Who or what is Jesus to you?
- Do you accept the deeds of power that are due to him?
- Where do you go to look for Jesus to see and ask?
- Are you wanting to be told that Jesus is the Messiah, or are you prepared to find out for yourself?
- What proof do you need?

The second part of the reading concerns Jesus talking about John the Baptist. He has given his answer to those followers of John who were sent to find out, and now Jesus turns his attention to the crowds. Maybe they were the remnants of those who had already been baptised and had become followers of John; maybe they were others who had travelled great distances only to find that John had been arrested. But Jesus was quite explicit in his speaking of John.

Jesus challenged people's expectations of John, and their motive for going to see him. It was not because of novelty or curiosity value, but because John, said Jesus, was the last and greatest of all the prophets, the 'Forerunner'. It was John's calling to point out, physically, the Messiah which all previous prophets had prepared God's people for. Yet worldly acclaim and honour was not the reward for recognising Jesus, but instead the kingdom of heaven.

- Why should Jesus need to 'defend' John the Baptist in the way he did?
- Was John the Baptist the last of the Old Testament prophets?
- Do you expect to be rewarded for your faith in this world?
- John was arrested and imprisoned: how far would you go in standing up for your faith?
- If the least of the kingdom were greater than John, what does that say about heaven?

John's ministry was in some ways the opposite of Jesus in that he stationed himself in one place, so people could find him and hear his message. He was outright in his proclamation of the Messiah. Yet the Messiah himself, Jesus, moved around and at times had to be searched for. He made no declarations about himself but allowed his actions to speak for himself. We cannot be told what to believe, we come to believe. St Anselm wrote a prayer which begins: 'O Lord my God, teach my heart this day where and how to find you.' It concludes: 'Let me seek you in my desire, let me desire you in my seeking, let me find you by loving you, let me love you when I find you.'