

What Were You Expecting?

In the name of him who comes to save us, dear friends in Christ: I'm willing to bet that you have at some point in your life suffered a major disappointment. It happened when you had high expectations for something, your hopes were raised, you were eagerly anticipating a positive outcome that you could already envision in your mind ... and whatever it was let you down. Things didn't turn out the way you thought they would. And so you were left with the frustrating feeling that you'd been cheated.

Now, when that happened, it might have been because your expectations were unrealistic or out of sorts; they may even have come from an overly inflated sense of entitlement. A week or so ago someone sent me a poster on the internet. It was divided into two sections. On one side there was a picture of an American girl, maybe 13 years old, wearing a pretty dress; *and she's crying her eyes out*. She's holding in her hand a cell phone that she obviously just unwrapped as Christmas gift. The caption on that side read, "I wanted a black 28G phone, and all I got was this lousy *white 14G* one instead!" Poor thing. You almost wanted to cry with her. On the other side of the poster there was a picture taken in some third world country of a pair of feet on which were fastened some makeshift sandals crudely fashioned from a couple of crushed plastic two liter pop bottles. There was no caption on that side. There didn't need to be. But it certainly put things into perspective. We really are quite spoiled in this country. On average we tend to expect a whole lot more than we deserve.

On the other hand, maybe when you were disappointed you had very good reasons to believe that the outcome you anticipated was going to take place exactly as you envisioned. There were certain assurances. There were encouraging signs. Things were moving in the right direction and falling into place—which made the disappointment when it came that much more difficult to bear.

This is more or less where we find St. John the Baptizer at the beginning of today's Gospel reading. He's experiencing that kind of disappointment. It's quite a contrast to the way he was when we heard from him last week when he was at the height of his ministry. Then he was preparing people for the coming of the Lord by thundering against their sin. From his pulpit in the desert wasteland beyond the Jordan, he poured forth sermons full of hellfire that left his hearers trembling with fear at the soon-to-be-revealed wrath of God. He called everyone – high and low and from every station of life – to repent. "Get ready", he declared, "for when the Lord appears he's going to destroy all sinners and establish forever his righteous reign. *You don't want to be on the wrong side of that.*" And when the people asked what they should do, he told them. First he gave them a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of their sins. And then he sent them on their way with instructions about how to bear the fruits of repentance. "Share what you have with the poor and needy. Be honest and upright in your work. Don't cheat, steal or extort anyone. Obey the commandments of God."

It would be hard to overstate the success of John's ministry. Yes, it's true that some were against him and his message, mostly the religious leaders and self-righteous Pharisees who didn't think they had any sins serious enough to repent of; but for the most part people listened to him. Even the most notorious public sinners like tax collectors and prostitutes were repenting, cleaning up their acts, and trying to live godly lives. The land of Israel was undergoing a moral transformation – a renaissance of human righteousness. And John was

leading the way. What's more, he knew it. He wouldn't be human if he didn't feel some pride in his accomplishments. And I expect that he thought that when the Christ appeared, he'd be able to say, "Here they are, Lord. These are the repentant – the ones I saved for you. Now it's your turn to destroy those sinners who wouldn't repent and establish your kingdom."

That's where John was last week. Today's text is several chapters later in Luke's Gospel. Maybe a year or so has passed, and a lot has happened since then. Some of it was very encouraging for John. Jesus of Nazareth came to be baptized. And when he came up out of the water, John saw the heavens opened and the Spirit of God descend on Jesus as a dove. He heard the voice of the Father from heaven, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased." And by this John knew that the hour had come. The Christ had appeared right on schedule. It was time for John himself to begin to step aside and get out of the way, and let the Lord take over and begin his business of judging and destroying the wicked.

But not *everything* that happened was so encouraging to John. Sometime after he had baptized Jesus, King Herod Agrippa was involved in an adulterous scandal with his brother's wife. And John, being John, the man sent by God to call sinners to repentance, did his thing. He accused the king of his sin publicly. And Herod, who wasn't about to repent or change, threw John into prison to silence him. That's where John was now: in the dungeon of Herod's desert fortress east of the Dead Sea, far removed from the crowds that once came to hear him. And sitting sweltering in his stinking cell, a handful of John's loyal disciples keep bringing him progress reports about Jesus and his ministry.

And John is profoundly disappointed with what he's hearing. Where John was all urgency and "let's get it done now for the Lord is at hand", Jesus is taking his sweet time. Where John was ascetic, denying himself fine food and drink, wearing rough clothes, and eschewing life's comforts; Jesus seems to welcome life's pleasures. He's attending parties and banquets – and he doesn't seem to care with whom he dines so sumptuously. One day he's with a bunch of those rich, hypocritical Pharisees who refused to repent, and the next he's with tax collectors and prostitutes—some of whom probably did repent and were baptized by John, but then, upon returning home, ended up slipping back into their old habits. Those ungrateful backsliders! What was Jesus doing? What was he thinking? Where was the fire? Where was the fury? Where was the wrath of God from heaven that was going to be revealed? When was Jesus going to use his mighty power to sweep aside that wicked old adulterer Herod and the rest of his enemies, and set up his own righteous kingdom? Jesus, if you are the Lord, what are you waiting for? Why don't you fix it all now?

And I wonder ... have you ever felt the same way? Do you sometimes have those same thoughts? With the world around us so full of evil and terrible things happening, do you ever find yourself asking, "Why didn't the Lord stop that? Why didn't he prevent it from happening? When is he going to intervene and set things right?" The angels at Jesus' birth sang about peace on earth; but we sure don't see any of it, do we? Instead evil people continue to perform unspeakable crimes, and it doesn't seem like the Lord is doing anything about it. Just two days ago in Connecticut we witnessed yet another horrible school shooting – a thing too terrible to imagine – and it's only one of a long string of similar events. And besides this sort of violent crime, hardly a week goes by when we're not hearing about another government scandal in which some supposedly trustworthy politician is involved in corruption or an adulterous affair. What's worse is that these things are happening so often that they're becoming commonplace to us. The world is becoming very dark indeed.

And so we come here to the church, where we might reasonably expect things to be better; but we find it's full of sinners and scandals too. There are bitter struggles between cliques and rival factions, there are arguments over doctrine, and we've got families falling to pieces at pretty much the same rate as the rest of the world. We've got the self-righteous who like the Pharisees don't think they have anything serious to repent of and look down their noses at those they consider to be less worthy, and we've got backsliders who are constantly struggling with sin, falling again and again for the same temptations. And the worst of this is – if you're honest – you have to admit that depending on the day or the hour, you could be either one of them. It's enough to make you think, "Jesus, even if you're not going to fix the whole world right now, why at least don't you come straighten out your church? Why don't you fix me so I don't have to keep struggling with my sin?"

John's disappointment with the ministry of Jesus caused him to doubt whether he was the Christ after all. Despite the divine testimony he had personally seen and heard, despite the earlier success of his ministry, despite even the sure and certain Word of the prophets that John himself had played a part in fulfilling, because his expectations were not being met in terms of the speed and scope that he had envisioned, John gave way to doubt and unbelief. He sent two of his disciples to Jesus with a question that proved he'd fallen from the faith: "Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?" The implications of the question are clear. If the former and you are the Christ, then why aren't you acting like it? And if the latter, then why did you dupe me into thinking that you were?" Either way, it's a sharp rebuke.

And you might think that Jesus would have been offended; but he wasn't. Instead he dealt with John with the same patience and compassion that marked his interaction with all who were struggling with sin and doubt. Having just performed a number of healing miracles – including raising a man from the dead, Jesus responds to John with a passage from Isaiah the prophet that foretells what the Christ will do when he comes. "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the Good News preached to them." And to the passage Jesus adds these words: "Blessed is the one who is not offended by me."

All together, it was Jesus telling him, "Yes John, I'm the one. And the work of the kingdom is moving forward precisely as planned even if not according to your timetable and the expectations you created for me. Don't fear. I've got it under control. I've got more people to call to repentance, more people to heal, more to whom to give the gift of sight, hearing, strength, and life, and more people to whom to declare the Good News. Trust me, John, and you too will be blessed." It's what John needed to hear. And no doubt the words of Jesus restored his faith. But he was martyred not long afterward, so he didn't get to see the end of Christ's ministry – which I think would have been a surprise even for John.

Seeing all the evil and injustice in the world, and suffering personally because of it, John longed to see the wrath of God revealed. He wanted to see sinners destroyed. He didn't understand that Jesus' first earthly ministry was primarily a rescue mission. John read the passages about how the Lord's coming would be a day of darkness and judgment and thought that the wicked would be destroyed immediately. But the Lord had another plan – one full of compassion and grace. Instead of destroying the wicked, Jesus came to save them. He did it by taking their wickedness upon himself and allowing himself to be judged, condemned, and destroyed in their place. So it was indeed a day of wrath; but wrath of God fell on him. He absorbed all of it, all the punishment that sinners deserve, and in the end it killed him. But he didn't stay dead. Having paid the full price of our sin, death no longer had any claim on him.

And so he rose again to declare the Good News that in him – that is, through faith in him – the wicked are reconciled to God.

And through the ministry of his Church, Jesus continues to preach this Good News to the poor in spirit. And the Holy Spirit works through this Word to open our eyes and ears to the truth, to cleanse us from the leprosy of sin, and to raise us to new life. It's happening. It's happening now – even if not according to the timetable we might want or to the expectations we might have. In this world so full of evil in which people commit all manner of awful crimes, the work of Christ in his church goes on to save the wicked. And so it will, as long as we are still in this age of grace.

St. Paul, who had the advantage of coming after Jesus, understood this. When he wrote the letter to the Philippians – a portion of which we heard as today's Epistle – he was in prison for his preaching, just like John was. But note how different his attitude is. Where John was frustrated and filled with doubt because his expectations were not being realized, Paul is positively jubilant. And he had plenty of reason not to be. He had been abandoned by many of his former friends and colleagues, he had enemies all around falsely accusing him, there were all kinds of problems in the churches he had helped plant throughout the Roman world, and he knew that he would soon be facing a trial at which he was likely to be condemned and killed. And in the midst of all this he says, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say rejoice."

Considering what was going on, how could he say this? What caused him to be so joyful? The answer is simple: he knew what to expect. In this life he knew to expect trouble and hardship. He knew that sinners would keep on sinning and that he personally would be constantly struggling with his own sin. He knew that enemies of the Gospel would continue to arise and persecute the faithful. He knew that false teachers would try to lead them astray. He knew that in this world, he would only know suffering. But he also knew Jesus, who had overcome the world, and who, through his ongoing work in the church would continue to give him faith, hope, and strength to endure to the end. And he knew what to expect after that too: a crown of life with Christ in glory, which is a perfect cause to rejoice now and always.

What are you expecting? Keep your trust in Christ and you will never be disappointed. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!