

When Sermon for 9.7.17

Today's gospel story takes place after Jesus had instructed his disciples about mission and then went on to teach and proclaim his message in their cities.

John the Baptist had been arrested by Herod and was being held in prison.

John had sent messengers to ask Jesus if he was the one they had been waiting for or did they have to wait for another.

Now this rather simple interchange holds strong implications. John who had previously testified "This is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, this is he of whom I said, after me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me," had doubts.

No doubt John was himself feeling very low while in prison and in this state of vulnerability - and I'm sure many of us can identify with this - was wondering why he had been left to languish, seemingly alone because he was doing God's work.

Had he got it all wrong - was Jesus the one, or did they have to wait for another.

Jesus response to John's messengers is straight to the point – they are to go and tell John what they see and hear, words are not enough to help John now, more is needed – indisputable truth that is seen and heard is needed – the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the poor have good news brought to them.

Now Jesus words here define his role.

He is God's blessing on the needy.

He is the one who enters into the suffering of the people – his presence gives sight, mobility, cleanliness, hearing and life.

He is different to what was expected – different to a sovereign ruler who conducts proceedings from a distance or someone who comes to judge and condemn.

Now this passage is built in part from Isaiah (ch 28, 35, 42) but the pattern portrayed in Isaiah, does not mention the cleansing of lepers or the raising of the dead.

Jesus words suggest that Jesus fits more with the prophesy from Zechariah that we heard in today's first reading, "Lo your king comes to you ...And he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth." And those who are not offended by the scale of the newness he brings are blessed. "Blessed is he who does not take offense at me."

In today's passage Jesus pays great tribute to John the Baptist. He tells the crowd that no one is greater born of woman and then includes him in a timeline of salvation history.

Jesus proclaims that up till John the Baptist, the time was one of prophetic promise; but John who paved the way for the messiah, had begun the time of fulfilment: "for all the prophets and the law prophesied until John came; and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. Let anyone with ears listen."

The gospel writer closes this section with Jesus in prayer with the father.

In this prayer Jesus asserts his loving oneness with the Father and gives thanks that it is those without influence, training and power who have heard and understood the message he brings.

Jesus parting words: 'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest,' 'Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart,' are wisdom personified.

They contain feminine characteristics as the giver of rest and comfort and extend a gracious invitation to the people.

The gospel narrative today points to relationship with God centered in the person of Jesus Christ.

For in Jesus we see the nature of God's love for us in a way that had always been promised by the prophets – a way that speaks about personal intimacy between God and ourselves experienced both in our joys and in the suffering of our lives.

In today's epistle, Paul details why life in God's Holy Spirit is the cornerstone of our lives as disciples.

He describes how easy it is for us to let our ego draw and hold our attention on superficial things that distract us and keep us in shallow waters.

Paul goes into some detail about how our darkness can dominate our goodness and allow us to do things that we abhor. "I do not do what I want but I do the very thing that I hate".

Life in the Spirit, therefore, he tells us in the following verses, is the only way we can grow and come into our deeper truth in Christ.

In spiritual but practical terms, how we do this, I believe, is to follow the person of Jesus Christ and enter into prayerful communion with the Father empowered by the Holy Spirit, for the beauty of Christ in us emerges from the prayerful life of the believer in communion with our Trinitarian God, who is relationship in love.

My prayer for each one of us - as we go from here today, is that we go with Jesus words in our hearts and respond to them in the Spirit's fullness of love in which they are given:

"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest,' 'Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart.

The lord be with you.