

HEARERS OF THE WORD

Isaiah 35:1-6a, 10; Psalm 146 (145); James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11

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

Matt 11:2 When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples 3 and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” 4 Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: 5 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. 6 And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.”

Matt 11:7 As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? 8 What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. 9 What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 10 This is the one about whom it is written,

‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.’

11 Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

John the Baptist asks the question we all ask: is *this* the one? The question may seem a strange one given that (a) in Luke 1-2 they are supposed to be cousins and (b) Jesus was a disciple of John. As for (a), it would seem clear that the family link is a metaphor for their theological relatedness. As for (b), we really know very little of their actual relationship. Jesus was indeed a disciple of John. John did baptise Jesus. Jesus started his ministry once John was arrested. It would



seem that Jesus saw John as an authentic and important prophet (cf. 11:7-15; 21:23-27).

Furthermore, only when John could no longer function did Jesus enter the public arena. How much they knew each other personally remains unanswerable for lack of evidence.

KIND OF WRITING

There are two anecdotes here, each with a slightly extraneous punch-line. The second story (about the identity of John) depends on the first (about the identity

Thought for the day

Joy in believing might seem an “extra” in today’s challenging climate for faith. Many of us struggle simply to hold on, not to mention being exuberant about it all. And yet, of course there is deep happiness in faith. First of all, everything around is a gift and behind all the gifts stands a giver. Secondly, love is at the heart of it all and, in the faith, nothing is ever “lost” or “wasted.” Faith, hope and love endure and the greatest of these is love. Finally, why not “permit” ourselves true joy in all that God has done for us and still does for us in Jesus and in the Holy Spirit?

Prayer

We believe, loving God, that you take delight in all you have made. Open up in us again the springs of joy, that we may delight in you, our true joy.

of Jesus).

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

The response of Jesus is in the language of Isaiah:

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert. (Isaiah 35:5-6)

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those

Advent 1	Is 2:1-5	Ps 122	Rom 13:11-14	Mt 24:37-44	Wake up!
Advent 2	Is 11:1-10	Ps 72	Rom 15:4-9	Mat 3:1-12	Convert!
Advent 3	Is 35:1-6, 10	Ps 144	James 5:7-10	Mt 11:2-11	Be patient!
Advent 4	Is 7:10-14	Ps 24	Rom 1:1-7	Mt 1:18-24	God-with-us

who mourn in Zion—to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory. (Isaiah 61:1–3)

Also Isaiah 26:19; 29:18; 42:7, 18.

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

(i) John the Baptist in Matthew: preaching (3:1-12); baptism (3:13-17); arrest (4:12); enquiry (11:2-6); as Elijah (11:7-15); comparison with Jesus (11:16-19); death (14:1-12); authority (21:23-27). Quite a large presence.

(ii) “The one who is to come”: regularly found of the Messiah in Matthew (Matt 3:11; 11:3; 16:28; 21:9; 23:39; 24:30; 26:64).

(iii) Disciples of John: Matt. 11:2; 14:12. Mark, Q, and John agree in speaking of a special group of “disciples of John.” Remarkably, these writings witness to the continued existence of this distinct group throughout Jesus’ ministry. A group of John’s adherents continued on to rival followers of Jesus even after John’s death. Cf. Acts 18:25; 19:3-4.

(iv) The reference is to the ministry of Jesus in Matt 8-9: the blind receive their sight (9:27-31), the lame walk (9:2-8), the lepers are cleansed (8:1-4), the deaf hear (9:32-34—*kōphos* meant deaf and/or mute), the dead are raised (9:18-26), and the poor have good news brought to them (9:35-38).

(v) Elijah or an Elijah-type figure was widely expected to usher in the end. This was based not only on the spectacular manner of Elijah’s departure (2Kings 2:1-11) but also on prophetic oracles, such as “Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents, so that I will not come and strike the land with a curse.” (Mal 4:5-6); and “At the appointed time, it is written, you [i.e. Elijah] are destined to calm the wrath of God before it breaks out in fury, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and to restore the tribes of Jacob.” (Sir 48:10). The Elijah identity of John is hinted at in Mark, expressly affirmed by Jesus in Matthew and flatly denied by John himself in the Fourth Gospel. He did cause some anxiety!

ST PAUL

Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to

be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ, to all God’s beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (Romans 1:1–7)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 2 “The Messiah” is Matthew’s word here—it reminds the readers of Jesus’ real identity, still unknown to John the Baptist. Prison: cf. 14:1-3.

Verse 3 Given the role and especially the fiery preaching of John, the question is a natural one, as Jesus does not seem to fit the bill (cf. chapter 3).

Verse 4 An oblique answer, suggesting, that this exchange is perhaps a later theological clarification of how these two foundational figures related.

Verse 5 Deeds found as above in Matthew 8-9. Elijah and Elisha did similar deeds of power. Matthew 5-7 and 10 are in the general picture as well.

Verse 6 Same word as in the Beatitudes in 5:1-12. Offence, literally to be scandalised (14-8-2-2). Cf. 13:21 and 15:12. Jesus warns John not to fall himself from faith.

Verse 7 Rich in rhetorical questions and climax, Jesus identifies John as more than a prophet. The images of reed, robes and palaces may point to Herod Antipas, who put John into prison and whose coins bore a reed.

Verse 9 “More than a prophet” because he ushered in the final age.

Verse 10 This important citation from Malachi 3:1 is mistakenly cited under Isaiah in Mk 1:2. Cf. also Ex 23:20.



Verse 11 “Born of women” covers all humanity. “Least (in the kingdom)” is an important expression in Matt 5:19; 25:40, 45. Jesus’ own followers are greater than John himself, amazingly.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. In response to the question of John, Jesus let his actions speak for him. Some people show by the way they live what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Who has given you such an example? Perhaps there have been times when you have done the same for others.

2. John made a journey of faith from an incomplete knowledge of Jesus to a deeper understanding of who he was. Recall similar steps in your journey of faith.

3. Faith is not primarily about answering abstract theological questions but about living the gospel. What in your life has helped you to get that sense of perspective?

4. John marked the end of an era, Jesus the beginning of a new one. In our lives how do we honour the past and yet be free to move on into a new era?

PRAYER

God of glory and compassion, at your touch the wilderness blossoms, broken lives are made whole, and fearful hearts grow strong in faith.

Open our eyes to your presence and awaken our hearts to sing your praise.

To all who long for your Son’s return grant perseverance and patience, that we may announce in word and deed the good news of the kingdom.

We ask this through him whose coming is certain, whose day draws near: your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near

Jas 5:7 Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. 8 You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. 9 Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors! 10 As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. 11 *Indeed we call blessed those who showed endurance. You have heard of the endurance of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.*

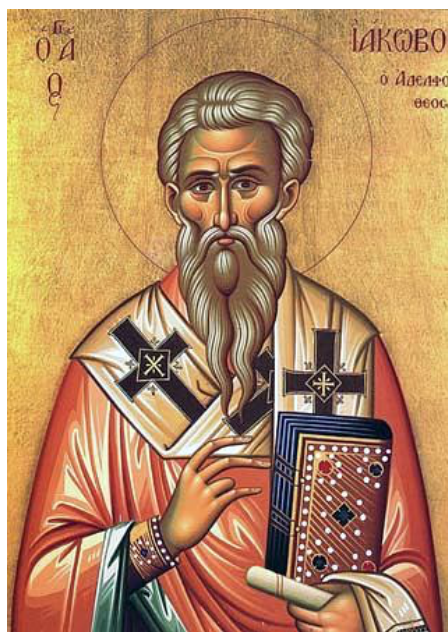
INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The full section here really runs from v. 1 to v. 11 (added). The excerpt is very suitable for Advent. This is the only time these verses are read in the three-year cycle of readings.

KIND OF WRITING

Attempts to identify the kind of writing are likewise quite varied. It may very well be a letter, given that letters at the time took many forms. More precise categories include moral discourse, a baptismal catechism and Christian wisdom.

There seems to be no agreement on the outline or structure of James. Eugene Boring offers the following outline:



- 1:1 Salutation
- 1:2-27 Perspectives on Christian Character
- 2:1-13 Christian morals and the Law
- 2:14-26 Faith and works
- 3:1-12 Responsible speech
- 3:13-4:12 Christians and conflict
- 4:13-5:6 Concerning wealth
- 5:7-20 Life within the community

The reading, vv. 7-11, is marked by no fewer than *five* imperatives. In the previous verses, there are severe warnings against the rich. In the second part, the tone changes to instruction for life within the community.

CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

The community for which this letter is written is unclear. The writer addresses himself to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion (James 1:1). This could mean Jews outside Palestine or, if the writer is thinking of the “true Israel”, Christians anywhere.

As for the writer, there are five James in the New Testament. Only two a potential candidates for author: *James*, son of Zebedee and brother of John or *James* the brother of the Lord. The former was killed in 44 AD by Agrippa I. The latter, according to Josephus was stoned in 62 or 69 AD. There are difficulties identifying either of these with the author: the excellent Greek, the use of rhetoric, the absence of reference to Jesus (named only twice in Jas 1:1; 2:1) and finally the address to the diaspora.

RELATED PASSAGES

Jesus also said, “The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.” (Mark 4:26–29)

And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints. (1Thessalonians 3:13)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 7 Patience is a Christian virtue

across the New Testament: Rom. 2:4; 9:22; 1 Pet. 3:20; 2 Pet. 3:15. The “coming” is lit. the *parousia* (see Matt. 24:3, 27; 1 Cor. 15:23; 1 Thess. 2:19; 4:15; 5:23; 2 Thess. 2:1; 2 Pet. 1:16; 3:4; 1 John 2:28). The NRSV “beloved” is lit. *adelphoi*, i.e. brothers and sisters. The image of the farmer recalls a parable of Jesus unique to Mark (see above). On the proverbial early and late rains see Deut. 11:14; Jer. 5:24; Hosea 6:3; Joel 2:23.

Verse 8 On the strengthening of heart, see 1 Thess 3:13 above. The same word is used for the nearness of the kingdom in Mark: “*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.*” (Mark 1:15)

Verse 9 This is completely normal, of course (and alas). The writer already alluded to this in the letter: *Do not speak evil against one another, brothers and sisters. Whoever speaks evil against another or judges another, speaks evil against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. There is one law-giver and judge who is able to save and to destroy. So who, then, are you to judge your neighbour?* (James 4:11–12) *Doors: So also you, when you see these things happening, know that he is near, right at the door.* (Mark 13:29)

Verse 10 No specific examples are given but see the following: Heb 11:32–38; 1 Macc 2:49–61; Sir 44:16–50:21.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. In your own life at the moment, where you do find the need for patience? Is there also a spiritual *impatience* to be acknowledged?

2. The example of the farming is familiar and inspiring: certain things simply take (their own) time. What has helped you appreciate this word of wisdom?

3. Are there particular examples of patience who have encouraged you in your own life? Give thanks to God for them all.

PRAYER

Give us the wisdom which comes from you, O Lord, that we may know how to endure and when to be patient.

In your eyes, there is a time for everything. Help us to live expectantly in the present moment that we may be found watchful in prayer, strong in love and faithful to the breaking of the bread. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

The eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped

Isa 35:1 The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus
2 it shall blossom abundantly,
and rejoice with joy and singing.
The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.
They shall see the glory of the Lord,
the majesty of our God.

3 Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.
4 Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
“Be strong, do not fear!
Here is your God.
He will come with vengeance,
with terrible recompense.
He will come and save you.”

5 Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
6a then the lame shall leap like a deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.
10 And the ransomed of the Lord shall return,
and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.



INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Our reading captures the mood of *Gaudete Sunday*. The festive note within Advent is marked by the lighting of the third, rose candle on the wreath.

KIND OF WRITING

Some of the very best biblical poetry is to be found in Job and in second Isaiah, including this chapter here. The lines are more or less all in parallel, showing that “uneasy synonymy” which gives biblical poetry its peculiar energy.

At a literary level, we make note that striking combination of metaphors from nature, forensic vocabulary and “body language”: *nature* (wilderness, dry land, desert, crocus, blossom, Lebanon, Carmel, Sharon); *forensic* (vengeance, recompense, save); *body* (hands, knees, heart, eyes, ears, lame, tongue).

RELATED PASSAGES

Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, “Here is your God!” See, the Lord God comes with might,

and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. (Isaiah 40:9–10) See also: Isaiah 41:18–19 and Isaiah 51:3.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

Generally, scholars would hold that both ch. 34 and ch. 35 reflect the later experience of the great Exile in Babylon and to be located in Second Isaiah.

V. 6a makes the parallel with the Gospel stand out. Then we move forward to the marvellous vision of v. 10.

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 Three terms are used for the land: wilderness, dry land and the Arabah. All three refer to the great rift of the Jordan, leading to the Gulf of Aqaba. The landscape looks forbidding but is essentially fertile when it rains which is seldom. The crocus is a symbol of the transformation which occurs when it does actually rain.

Verse 2 The glory of Lebanon is its majestic covering of trees. Carmel and Sharon are coastal areas known for fertility, fields and flowers. The glory of the Lord is an extensive motif in Isaiah.

Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken. (Isaiah 40:5)

Verse 3-6b Perhaps we are meant to imagine a pilgrim group, making its way to Jerusalem. Humanity, in all its frailty, is well represented.

The time of terrible devastation and punishment is coming to an end.

Then I said, “How long, O Lord?” And he said: “Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is utterly desolate; until the Lord sends everyone far away, and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land. Even if a tenth part remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak whose stump remains standing when it is felled.” The holy seed is its stump. (Isaiah 6:11–13)

Verse 10a The bodily metaphors are dropped and replaced by the language of redemption and salvation. The “redeemed of the Lord” make their return to Zion:

Zion shall be redeemed by justice, and those in her who repent, by righteousness. (Isaiah 1:27)

Why was no one there when I came? Why did no one answer when I called? Is my hand shortened, that it cannot redeem? (Isaiah 50:2)

Verse 10b The tone at the end is quite ecstatic. It no accident that this very evocative text was set to such deeply felt music by Brahms, in his German Requiem, marking the death his mother.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The vision is one of home coming and deep fulfilment. This could be true literally for each of us at some point in our story. It could also be a way of speaking of our spiritual “flying home to God” (Kavanagh).

2. Can I name my own needs using the metaphors of the poetry: How am I deaf, lame etc.?

PRAYER

God of all our joy, you call us all to life in abundance and to deep inner joy in knowing you. At times we are deaf, lame, unable to speak. Open our ears that we may walk again the path of life and praise your name. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

THE LITURGY

Isaiah 35:1-6a, 10; Psalm 146 (145); James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11

THE READINGS

The link with the Gospel is clear: Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: 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. (Matthew 11:4-5) In itself, this text is an echo of Isaiah (as Luke makes clear): good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn. (Isaiah 61:1-2)

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 146 (145) makes an ideal response, especially in the light of the Gospel: It is the Lord who gives sight to the blind, who raises up those who are bowed down, the Lord, who protects the stranger and upholds the widow and orphan.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Isaiah 35:1-6a, 10

What may we hope? What do we hope for? This reading invites us to deep confidence in God, who desired to bring us back to himself.

Second reading

James 5:7-10

Growing takes time and patience. We know this in our human experience, but it is also true in growth of our faith.

Gospel

Matthew 11:2-11

The question of John the Baptist—“are you the one?”—is raised by many today. Can we name what in our own experience leads us to say, yes, Jesus is the one?

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 15 December

Numbers 24:2-7, 15-17

Balaam was a prophet in Moab. When the king of Moab tried to get him to

curse Israel, he uttered instead a remarkable blessing. The last lines speak of a star and a sceptre, symbols of the coming Messiah, picked up in Matthew 1-2.

Matthew 21:23-27

Jesus counters a trick question and yet it is obvious that he think John the Baptist came from God.

Tuesday 16 December

Zephaniah 3:1-2, 9-13

Both praise and blame are found in this reading. In these days, when affirmation is considered so healthy, we can listen to both!

Matthew 21:23-27

This is one of the blindingly obvious parables. The closing identification with the acceptance or rejection of John should not leave us off the hook. Are there people today whose uncomfortable word I resist?

Wednesday 17 December

The next 8 days, December 17-24, form a special period within Advent, intensifying the preparation for the birth of Jesus. The readings, while perhaps unfamiliar, are chosen with the greatest care. The Gospel writers did indeed have Old Testament anticipations very much in mind. The “match” between the first reading and the Gospel in these final days should help us reflect even more deeply as we mark the birth of the longed-for Messiah.

Genesis 49:2, 8-10

The great patriarch Jacob is about to die and he gathers his sons around him for a final blessing. The blessing to Judah (= son, tribe and tribal area) includes a reference to the sceptre—pointing to the much later Davidic dynasty. God’s fidelity to David’s line is fulfilled in Jesus. It thus prepares for the Gospel, which is the genealogy in Matthew.

Matthew 1:1-17

This apparently dry genealogy tells several stories. The story of Jesus ancestors—with many not so holy! The women are mightily significant—God writing straight with crooked lines of

human lives! There is hope for us all, seems to be part of the message. The grand schema is also eloquent, as it moves from promise and possession to loss and longing. Thus the writer sets the stage for the birth of Jesus.

Thursday 18 December

Jeremiah 23:5-8

The oracle cited here has its historical place in the Exile (as is very clear from the reading itself). But the real reason for the choice lies in the first couple of verses, which underline God’s faithfulness to David and his offspring. This prepares directly for the Gospel.

Matthew 1:18-24

This passage continues where yesterday’s left off. God-with-us—Emmanuel—reminds us of God’s word to Jacob, Moses, Joshua, David, Solomon, Jeremiah and so forth. Also to us, if we reflect back

Friday 19 December

Judges 13:2-7, 24-25

The birth stories of Jesus in Matthew 1-2 and Luke 1-2 often echo highly significant accounts in the Old Testament. Today’s reading from Judges is an example: an annunciation to a woman who is childless. There is even a similarity between the word *nazirite* (a kind of prophet) and Nazareth (or Nazarene).

Luke 1:5-25

Our Gospel is also an annunciation but this time to a childless father, to Zechariah the priest who is to become the father of John the Baptist.

Saturday 20 December

St Fachanan, bishop

Isaiah 7:10-14

This passage from Isaiah is explicitly cited in Matthew’s account of the annunciation to Joseph in a dream.

Luke 1:26-38

The annunciation to Mary (the fourth in our sequence) matches the pattern of Old Testament annunciation scenes and then, significantly, breaks it. Mary is open to God’s call.