

Richmond Hill
Richmond, Virginia
13 December 2010
3 Advent
Matthew 11:2-11
John the Baptist's Question
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Building the Kingdom from the Ground up

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" 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. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

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? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 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.

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." (*Matthew 11:2-11*)

In this most powerful Gospel for Advent, we hear the account of John the Baptist's inquiry into the ministry of Jesus. It was a desperate, final inquiry from John. The great prophet was incarcerated, imprisoned by Herod, and about to lose his head. He felt that his own time was short.

You cannot help but be touched by his inquiry. He sent some of his own disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Clearly John wanted to know if this was the person whose arrival he had sensed, or predicted, through the prophetic word he had heard in his heart. It would be unrealistic to avoid the suspicion that John was also wondering if there was someone or something coming – something which had not yet happened – which might get him out of prison before he was executed.

We do not hear whether or not John and his disciples considered Jesus' reply to be satisfactory. We can pray and hope that he did – although it must have been grim news as well as hopeful news to him. In his reply, Jesus gave John both a "Yes" and a "No." No, the kingdom would not come soon enough to change the whole scene and

remove Herod. But yes, the kingdom was coming both in spirit and in truth, and would be built on a firm foundation that could not pass away.

In response to the question from John's disciples, Jesus lays out the program of kingdom-building for which he lays the cornerstone.

The Kingdom of this world diffuses accountability for evil.
But the Kingdom of Heaven is built from the ground up.
The gateway to the kingdom of heaven is open to everyone.

1. The Kingdom of this world diffuses accountability for evil.

This was the message of John the Baptist, and Jesus affirms both the importance and the accuracy of that message to both his own and to John's disciples:

John was even more than a prophet, Jesus says. He was the final messenger before the coming of the kingdom of heaven: "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." There has been no greater prophet than John, Jesus says.

John's prophetic message was directed especially to the social, political, and economic leaders of the Jewish state, who had wrapped their domination of the majority of the people in a cloak of piety. The Pharisees and Sadducees had come out to him at the Jordan, and he attacked them as a class, indiscriminately: "You brood of vipers!" he said. "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

Brood of snakes, a generation of snakes! He didn't discriminate between these people. By virtue of their station in the society he was calling them out and attacking them, challenging them to show by their actions that they had changed their way of seeing things.

In this time in America, we should be able to see clearly the kind of thing which John was talking about. For we are in a time of enormous distress as a nation. The hidden secrets are coming out – the greed and corruption of the last thirty years are being exposed. Wall Street has become almost completely unhinged from responsible relationship to this or any other economy. The same thing is happening in Europe, and in several other economies. The increasingly wealthy and increasingly segregated wealthy classes of this country and other countries are wreaking havoc on the rest of the world's economies, and no longer seem to need the rest of us in order to get what they want. They manipulate this government and the other governments, and take what they want. Responsibility is diffused. If any one of them gets out of that picture, others will take his

or her place. It's a symptom of oppression that is systemic, almost beyond individual reach.

Hence John's violent words: "Generation of snakes! Who told you to flee from the wrath to come! Bear fruit that befits repentance!"

In a way, John has the last word on the oppression of the world. It is impersonal. The poison gets well distributed among many. It's even a human poison, hardly the singular fault of any individual. When you see people like Bill Gates and the billionaires who have joined him in pledging to give away significant portions of their money, you see the kind of awakened conscience that can come in this terrible situation – and you have to rejoice.

But the situation has not changed materially in this regard since the time of John the Baptist. It's hard to blame any individual, even though the John the Baptist rage might make you want to. Because the Kingdom of this World diffuses accountability for evil.

2. But the Kingdom of Heaven is built from the ground up.

"Go and tell John what you hear and see," Jesus tells John's disciples. "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. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

This may not be what John the Baptist thought he wanted to see, but it is certainly impressive. Jesus quotes and expands on Isaiah 61, a passage which describes what happens when God's spirit comes to humankind. And he says these things are happening.

What is happening is not that Herod is being challenged, or that the Roman armies are being confronted. Nor are the temple priests being called out for their greed and hypocrisy or the Pharisees and Sadducees getting their comeuppance. The brood of vipers are still firmly in place. The plutocracy which rules Israel, like the plutocracy which is controlling the American economy, is firmly in place.

But something else is going on: Blind people are receiving their sight, lepers are being cleansed, the deaf are hearing, the dead are being raised, and the poor are receiving good news. This is happening person by person, in town after town, in situation after situation. Individual human beings are finding what they need and finding the health of the kingdom of heaven. They are the prototypical citizens of the new kingdom, -- a kingdom which will not end.

The gifts of the kingdom are both physical and spiritual. Each of these descriptions of physical healing or rescue has a metaphorical content. The blind see: physically blind people see; morally blind people see; people blind to truth in any way, shape, or form, have their eyes and hearts and minds open. Deaf people hear – physically

deaf people recover hearing, and the deafness of persons to the truth and the love of God is broken through. So also lepers, and even dead people.

When it comes to the poor, the situation reverses itself. The poor in Jesus' teaching are not just those who are economically disadvantaged. They are the humble, earnest folk – in that sense, “poor” describes both an economic and a spiritual state. Such people can really hear the joy of God in a way that others cannot, even when there are no physical benefits attached. But in many cases the “good news” they hear won't be good news if it includes continued starvation and unemployment and despair. So this statement, too, has both a physical and a spiritual component.

These are individual stories. One after one the kingdom of heaven is being built, as the love and joy and acceptance of God comes to people who are in need and know their need of God. The Kingdom of this world diffuses accountability for evil. But the Kingdom of Heaven is built from the ground up, person by person, solid healing by solid healing.

3. The gateway to the kingdom of heaven is open to everyone.

The difference between the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of this world is that there are no prior qualifications – everyone is invited. It's not poverty or trouble which qualifies you for the good news of the kingdom. It just concentrates the attention and makes the need more focused. The individuals from the generation of vipers can receive the blessing just as sure as those who are conscious of their own great need.

The blind receive sight, and the lepers are cleansed, and the poor have good news preached to them. But here's the invitation to all: Blessed is the person who takes no offense at me. That's all. Receive what I say, take my invitation, admit your need of God, seek the love and hope that he holds out, and you – no matter who you are – are ready to walk right into that blessing.

This, of course, is what John could not really see. It wasn't just about repentance. It wasn't just about the structures of evil and diminished responsibility which oppressed the poor. It was all of those things, of course. John's social criticism has never been improved upon, and is still true.

But that's the last chapter in the old book. This new book is the book of blessing. It is a kingdom built person by person, brick by brick, on the firm foundation of the grace and blessing of God. The gateway to the kingdom of heaven is open to everyone. Blessed is anyone, blessed is everyone, blessed is each man, woman, and child – who takes no offense at me.

AMEN.