



## Are you the one?

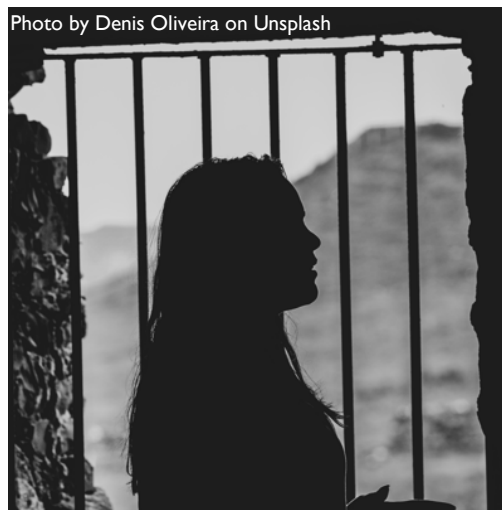
Rob Marsh SJ

In the gospel reading for the third Sunday of Advent, the imprisoned John the Baptist asks the most heart-breaking question in the bible and asks it for all of us: 'Are you the one ... or must we wait for someone else?' Rob Marsh SJ asks us to think about our reaction to Jesus's response.

John has never been a patient man. It's not patience that drives you to take up the prophet's staff, the hair shirt and the disgusting diet. It's not patience that drives you out among the desert's ravines to rave over the coming destruction. It's not patience that has you mouthing off to all-comers about their hypocrisy and evil. No, there's a thirst for change, a hunger for ending, a hurry to get it all over with. 'Even now the axe is laid at the roots of the tree!' he thunders. 'It's all over. Get ready! Be prepared! Because I, John, have a road to build and when it's built God will come down on you all like a blaze. He will stride down that highway, winnowing fan in hand, reaping the harvest and destroying the stubble. And as for you, Herod – friend of Rome, king of adulterers, living with your own brother's wife – as for you, beware! Beware the end coming to you.'

Patience? No. But why, when he has done his part, built his highway in the desert, even baptised the one to fulfil the vision – when he's done all this, why is he in prison waiting? Why is nothing happening? Where is the sound of the axe against the tree, the scent of fire on the wind? Where is the uproar of Israel in rebellion and Rome on the run? Where is it?

So John sits there, impatient, hope fading, doubt growing. Paces there, uncertain. 'Was I wrong? About Jesus? Has he let me down? Why is he doing nothing?'



Advent turns around in that question. All the waiting, all the patience and all the hope are distilled into that question, a question we have all asked at some time or another. Have I been wrong to trust Jesus? How can he have let me down like this?

So John asks the most heart-breaking question in the bible and asks it for all of us: 'Are you the one ... or must we wait for someone else?'

And should you laugh or should you cry over Jesus's answer? 'Tell John what you hear and what you see: the blind see, the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life, the poor hear good news, and, yes John, the ones who manage to believe in me are happy.'

John is deaf and blind. Not just because he's locked up in a hole somewhere, cut off from events but because he's locked up in a vision of death and judgement, reaping and ending. Where John wants an end, Jesus is bringing a beginning. John is drunk on the desert's stark beauty but Jesus wants to make a garden of it, a place for people to live and love, without sorrow, without lament.

So to John who doubts him, Jesus says: 'look and see ... the evidence is here ... can't you see the desert blooming, the sorrow melting, the fear falling away?'

It's a question without an answer ... at least in the text. We hear no more from John. We don't know whether he dies defeated or not. We don't know whether he learns to see what Jesus sees. But Matthew, the gospel writer, asks that question of John expecting you and me to answer it. Matthew's John is the last and greatest prophet of a dead age, an age that Jesus has left behind. Between John and Jesus there stands a great gap. A chasm of understanding. And the bridge across is only through that question: 'Can't you see the desert blooming?'

Well, can we? *Can* we rejoice in the present and still hope for the future? When we are unjustly imprisoned, unfairly impoverished; when we are sick before our time, or even just unaccountably saddened by life ... can we still *not* despair, *not* give in, *not* grow bitter, but look for signs of life and welcome them with joy? Because even in the darkest times God continues to do good.

It's not just a matter of being an optimist or being a pessimist ... as though the world might be either wonderful or awful depending upon how we look at it. It's about reality. Is God's kingdom really among us? Or have we hoped in vain? Is Jesus someone we can trust? Or have we been led up the garden path?

We have to ask him: 'Are you the one or must we wait for someone else?' Ask him!

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