John the Baptist in Prison

Matthew 11:2 When John (the Baptist) heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples to say to (Jesus), “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

A person in prison has a lot of time to think and to question things. And I imagine that this was especially true for John the Baptist when he gets thrown into prison for confronting those in power, especially King Herod. There in that dark dungeon, John, it would seem, begins to wonder about Jesus.

Jesus appears to him to be a most unlikely messiah. The messiah that John had apparently been looking for, and that which most of the Jews at that time seemed to desire, was one that would sweep through the holy land with massive force, drive out the Romans as the Maccabees had done to the Greeks years before, and establish an everlasting reign of righteous and peace.

But this was not what was happening with the ministry of Jesus. The reports John received in prison, I imagine, never spoke of anything of that kind of political power and force, and maybe just the opposite. So, John sends his own disciples to Jesus with a simple and humble question: "Are you the one to come, or are we to wait for another?" John expresses his puzzlement honestly and directly. He does not doubt that a messiah will arrive to deliver Israel. He is simply perplexed as to whether that messiah is Jesus or someone yet to appear.

In response to the question, Jesus commands the messengers to tell John what they see and hear of what Jesus is doing. Jesus then sums up his own activities in language inspired by today's reading from Isaiah: the blind gain their sight, lame people get up and walk, lepers are cleansed, deaf people hear, corpses are raised to life, and good news is delivered to the poor. Finally, Jesus concludes with a beatitude, a cautionary one: blessed are those who take no offense at me.

Jesus seems to be telling John to consider the evidence. His ministry matches what was promised centuries earlier by the prophet Isaiah as indications of God's arrival to redeem his people. Jesus appears to say in effect to John: Yes, I am the Messiah if you consider what I am really doing, though it is not necessarily what you may have wanted me to do.

Thus, Jesus makes his case to John based then on the healings and miracles of the kind recounted in the gospels, for those miracles support the identity of Jesus as the Messiah. For the power at work in miracles is irrefutably divine and holy. But these miracles are not done simply to prove that point. They are done to advance a mission, indeed, the very mission of God, I suggest.

That mission extends far beyond the compassion shown to the particular individuals who appear as characters in the gospel stories. For beyond that, these miracles have universal significance. They are not freak events that happened to a handful of lucky people in a small corner of the world two thousand years ago. These miracles reveal then the ways by which God seeks to transform the world, even now.

The Very Reverend Jeffrey John, who when I was at Oxford was the Dean of Divinity at Mary Magdalene (*Mag da lin*) College, and later became dean of St. Alban's Cathedral in England, wrote a noteworthy book entitled "The Meaning in the Miracles," that I

may have mentioned before. The previous Archbishop of Canterbury described "The Meaning in the Miracles" as a book "sometimes startling, often very moving, (but) never dull." I would recommend this book to anyone interested in exploring the meaning of the miracles of Jesus.

For Jeffrey John believes that in order to really understand the healing miracles of Jesus, we must see them in contrast to the purity laws found earlier in the Bible. About these miracles, he writes, "They seem to have been deliberately selected by the evangelists to show Jesus healing at least one of every category of persons who, according to the (Jewish) purity laws of Jesus' day, were specifically excluded from the inner temple and labeled as unclean."

Among the groups thus excluded were women, lepers, Samaritans, Gentiles, tax collectors, prostitutes, adulterers, children, people with various handicaps, and the dead. Jeffrey John goes on to speak of the universal significance of Jesus' miracles then, which is: "the (very) overturning of (the) religious and social barriers (of his day); (and) the abolition of (our) taboos; and (thus) Jesus' (compelling) declaration of God's love and compassion for everyone, expressed in the systematic inclusion of each class of (those) previously excluded or marginalized."

So, the healing miracles, most if not all of them, fulfill a mission that can be expressed in Jeffrey John's catchy phrase: "Including the Excluded." The public ministry of Jesus is in large part dedicated to this very effort, and not then to the overthrowing of the Roman Empire as many had wished. And the people around Jesus recognized this. They recognized that he was overturning ancient standards, that he was breaking the Jewish law, and he was disregarding the social norms of his day. Some people rejoiced at this, others were bewildered, and still others turned against him and plotted his death, so radical were his actions considered. These healings are signs then, I believe, of the breaking in of a new order, that new kingdom long sought, the very reign of God in our world, where everyone is loved and accepted. They reveal that God's ultimate desire is radically inclusive, enough to embarrass each one of us in some way or another, I imagine. Jesus turns out to be the Messiah, but perhaps not in the way most of the people expected, and maybe not in the way we expected either.

Now Jesus, of course, is no longer wandering the narrow streets of Nazareth and Capernaum and Jerusalem. But Jesus means then for his presence to be apparent now through those of us who follow him, who belong to his so-called Body, the Church. He looks to us, I believe, to continue his mission here in this world today and to further herald in that kingdom of God, even

in this place and this village. And a non-negotiable part of Jesus' mission then is this theme of the healing miracles, namely "Including the Excluded," those with whom we might ourselves even personally feel uncomfortable, and whom we usually avoid, or disdain.

We, of course, engage in a bit of self-protective literalism if we assume that the excluded of today are simply identical with the excluded in the time of Jesus. We might easily imagine ourselves showing compassion to Samaritans, for example, comfortable in the recognition that most of us will never meet one.

Thus, we must ask who then are the excluded today here in our communities, especially here in the town of Washington? Several of the same groups as in the time of Jesus might be excluded, at least to some extent I imagine, like women, prostitutes, adulterers, children, and the handicapped.

But we need to add other groups to list as well, I suspect. I would nominate people of color, and the poor and the uneducated, illegal immigrants perhaps, gays and lesbians maybe, certainly transgender individuals, ex-offenders and their families, refugees, the maritally unsuccessful, the extremely obese, the mentally challenged, and of course, the political extremists at both ends of the spectrum. Who do you think has a

place on this list of those our society marginalizes these days? Some of us may find ourselves on that list.

The challenge is that if we want to be loyal followers of Jesus and his mission, then we must, like him, deliberately include the excluded in our crowd, and intentionally reach out to the poor, the homeless, the refugee, the sick and the suffering. The consolation is that when we do this, we find Jesus in the person of the excluded. For he is present in this world not only in the face of the baptized, but also in the company of the rejected.

This is why St. John's is collecting diapers at this time of year in Jesus' honor for struggling young families in our community, why we organized special Food Drives to support the poor and hungry, when SNAP benefits were lost, and why we continue to organize regular Blood Drives to help the sick and suffering. This is why St. John's have allows our space to be used by the Literacy Volunteers helping those who cannot read or speak English, indeed this is why we continue to help resettle our refugee family in New Milford, why we volunteer at the Winter Homeless Shelter, why we gathered and sold gift cards at the Fete to support students of poor families in Torrington, names given to us by the Covenant of Care. But the more personal challenge, of course, is to actually invite those people into our parishes, our ministries, and indeed into our personal lives

and social circles, those who so many others dismiss and ignore, if not humiliate and disgrace, especially in this time of a divided nation, and a divided church. The real question is, do we, do we do this, and if not, why, especially at this time of year when we look celebrate the birth of Jesus among us? This is what we are called to do as followers of Jesus, I believe. So finally, may I add, blessed are those who take no offense at this. Amen.