

3rd Sunday of Advent (A)

14th December 2025

'John who was in prison ...'

Is 35: *God Himself will come and save you.*

James 5: *establish your hearts for the coming of the Lord is at hand.*

Mt 11: 2–11: *Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?*

I haven't often been in prison ... as a chaplain, I mean! In fact, hardly ever. It's just not a priestly ministry that has been put my way. I did often visit the *secure units* of Chase Farm Hospital's mental-health facility in Enfield when I was a newly ordained priest 25 yrs ago. And when I was in the parish in Herts I did occasionally have cause to help connect prison chaplains to families with a relative remanded in custody or sentenced to a prison term. But I didn't actually go in to a prison until this year. I was concelebrating Mass at the Oratory back in March, and the priest — a friend of mine — asked me after Mass if I could come and help him later that week at a Penitential Service for Catholic prisoners in Pentonville. I was free, and willingly went one afternoon, and although it was all new to me, it wasn't so strange. It was a bit chaotic, as the prisoners, understandably, have little control over the timeliness of their movements. So we began late, and it all

had to be abridged, but even so, for the chaplain to be able to preach the mercy of the Lord, and invite the men to think about repentance and Confession in Lent, was simple and moving. No-one would wish to be in prison, to be deprived of almost all one's liberties, and some prison living conditions, as we know, are pretty cramped and dreadful. But my (limited) experience, especially in Chase Farm years ago, was that they can also be places of real transparency and openness: necessitating an honest reflection of 'who I am,' 'what my life is about.' Some of the locked-up patients that I got to know in Enfield were the most open and humble people I've ever met, seeing that they were nothing without the Lord, but that with the Lord, even in prison, they were loved, and they wanted to draw closer to Him. At the nadir of life and liberty, they could see that Jesus was still with them, offering them freedom.

We hear today: "*John in his prison, had heard what Christ was doing ...*" and he sent his prison-visitors (his disciples) to track down Jesus and ask Him some questions. We'll come to that in a bit. John the Baptist, of

course, is not the only saint to have been imprisoned. In some places and at some times in Church history it's been a rather common occurrence for the saints to have been persecuted, imprisoned, even martyred: go back to the apostles in Jerusalem; to St Paul in chains in Caesarea and then in Rome; to St Ignatius journeying under arrest from Antioch to Rome; right up to our own day, e.g. Cardinal Francis Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan imprisoned in solitary confinement for 13 yrs in Vietnam (1975–88). The valiant experience of the latter was an exercise in heroic patience and Christian resilience, and his reflections, smuggled out of the prison on tiny scraps of paper, *Road of Hope*, is on my Christmas list ... even though it's out of print now.

St John the Baptist was imprisoned in the dungeon of Herod Antipas's palace, for his outspokenness in upholding the sanctity of marriage, and for declaring the immorality of Herod's having married his sister-in-law, Herodias. King Herod wished to silence John, though was reluctant to execute him, "*knowing him to be a good and holy man,*" so he was left to languish in prison. As for

anyone in prison under a vicious ruler or regime, it must have been a time of terror for John — but also a time to reflect. What caused him, at this time, to ask his followers to track down Jesus, whose ministry is now in full swing, and to quiz him? John prepared the way, to fulfil the Scriptures, as we know — *the voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Prepare the Way of the Lord,'* had done his job; he had recognised the Saviour; he had baptized Him in the Jordan to initiate His public ministry; and he had pointed Him out to his own disciples: "*Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.*" What was going on now? Was the isolation, added to the constant threat of Herodias's murderous designs on him, all proving too much? Was he feeling that he'd got it wrong? Was an acute depression getting to him, a feeling that his life, his brave testimony, the hardships of his ministry in the wilderness and at the Jordan, all been a waste of time? Was he actually doubting that Jesus was 'the one'? Was he in need of reassurance? We would well understand it. It's human; it's something we can relate to, when life gets us

down. Is God listening to me? Have all my efforts for him been a mistake? Why should I bother to be good, if I don't get the rewards ... if I end up feeling persecuted, my prayers unanswered? Yes, we could relate to that. Is that what John is teaching us? We're all human, we all have doubts, we all have a 'wobble' from time to time.

Well ... no ... I don't think that's what's happening. Just because John sends his disciples to seek out Jesus and ask Him, "*Are you the One?*" — "Are you actually the Christ after all?" — that doesn't mean to say it was John's own question. It could have been the question that his *followers* were asking, scandalized as they were by the loss of their leader, the incarceration of their holy and ascetic prophet in camel skin. I believe that John had always understood the Lord's ministry — how can he not have done, since he experienced that divine humility of His at the Jordan, when Jesus asked to be baptized by John? The *kenosis*, the 'self-emptying' of the Son of God in His incarnate form, was explicit; I don't think that John, even in the dark, dank, prison, was disillusioned by Jesus's

Messiahship of humility. But his followers might have been. John's sending them to Jesus was not that they might report back to him and give him some reassurance that Jesus was 'the One.' It was, instead, I feel, designed for the benefit of John's disciples, who might themselves have been unsure. Perhaps some of them were of the Zealot wing of Judaism, (as were some of Our Lord's own apostles — think of "Simon, *the Zealot*"), and clung to the idea of a warrior Messiah ousting the latest invaders, the Romans, from the 'Promised Land' of Israel. In which case, yes, John would have a real concern that they be converted away from ideas of violence and overthrow, and towards the spiritual revolution brought about by Jesus, a baptism of "*the Holy Spirit and fire.*"

The question that John formulates for his disciples to ask, is to elicit from Jesus an answer that demonstrates His true Messiahship: that it be in strict accordance with the prophetic tradition. Jesus can explain, in His own words, how His actions are *Messianic actions*, because He quotes, or paraphrases, Isaiah — hence the 1st Reading today, from

Is 35. It's likely that you've noticed the very similar words occurring — words from the 8th c. BC Isaiah reiterated in the 1st c. AD by the One who claims to be the Messiah —

“then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy”

The questioners have their fears relieved, their doubts quietened: Jesus *does* fulfil the expectations of Israel, and John's question helps them — and us — to see that. Jesus's gentle bringing of joy is through peaceful means, through the healing of souls and bodies, the forgiveness of sins, and the reconciliation with the Father. It will not bring an end to all the conflicts of the world, or the sufferings of believers — indeed it might well put them in prison, as it did for John the Baptist, Peter, Paul, ... or Cardinal Nguyen van Thuan — but whatever the material chains, a *spiritual freedom* is guaranteed in Christ. This is why John, in prison, is *“a prophet, yes, ... and more than a prophet.”* Though a victim of the jealousies of sinful men and women, and of the appalling violence meted out to those who speak spiritual truth to misused temporal power,

yet, as that stirring hymn for English martyrs' feasts, *Faith of our Fathers*, has it: *“our fathers, chained in prisons dark, were still in heart and conscience free.”*

On this rosy, joy-filled *Gaudete* Sunday — midpoint, more or less, of Advent — we can increase our joy, even as we reflect on John in his prison's rough conditions. Because he calls us to a radical understanding of what it means to be humanly free and therefore joyful and peaceful in *whatever* our life deals us. Just as much as at those gently flowing, sunlit Jordan waters, so also in the unlit Herodian dungeon, John the Baptist points us to Jesus: *Behold the Messiah; you must follow Him, now, not me.* John's role in life, and in our Advent liturgy is to keep pointing us to Jesus alone, *“the One who is to come.”* What is still chaining us to sin, what have we not yet repented of, this Advent? That's our real prison, not our material condition, and John assures us that Jesus can break those chains if we turn to Him with real sorrow for sin. *Gaudete* in that! As John said, in another place: *“My joy is now full; He must increase, I must decrease.”*