

**Third Sunday of Advent – Year A
(Dec. 15, 2013)**

Are You the One?

“Are you the one or should we look for another?”

Scripture scholars, commentators, theologians have all wondered why John the Baptist sends his disciples to ask Jesus this question. Some think that John is perhaps discouraged at this point in his career. He is in prison. Things have not turned out the way he had hoped they would. He has had very little if any influence on the powers that be. Quite the contrary. They have arrested him. So perhaps he is experiencing a bit of doubt and he wants some reassurance from Jesus.

Others say he wants these disciples who still cling to him to transfer their allegiance to Jesus since he knows his own career is at an end.

Still others say this is simply a clever teaching device to give his disciples some direct experience of Jesus and so learn what he already knows, that Jesus truly is the Messiah.

One of the problems in the historical situation at this time among the Jews was the fact that there were many different expectations of the Messiah, what he would be like, what he would do. Would he be a warrior king like David? Would he be a lawgiver like Moses? Would he be a judge as depicted in the Book of Daniel? Or would he be a healer as described by the Prophet Isaiah? Some people even thought that Israel itself was the Messiah, that the messianic oracles of the prophets referred not to a specific individual but to the people as a whole.

Perhaps John the Baptist's own expectations created a problem for him. His own teaching was much more ascetical, much more other-worldly, some might even say much more spiritual than that of Jesus. Jesus seemed more concerned with the problems that folks have in their ordinary, daily lives. And therefore his orientation seemed to be more this-worldly and even less spiritual. He was concerned about the blind, the deaf, the lame, the hungry, the poor. And his response to the disciples of John was along those lines. But, here, too, Jesus, perhaps like John, shows himself a good teacher. He tells them to go back and report what they see

and hear. In other words: reflect on your own experience and then respond to John out of that. Now if they have any kind of intelligence at all, the things he tells them to reflect on will send them right back to that passage from Isaiah that we heard as our first reading and their response to John would have to be, “Yes, he is the one who is to come. He has come and we need not look for another.”

Well, as I reflected on these Advent readings, I couldn't help but think of all those people in our world today who perhaps are still looking for a Messiah, a Savior, someone in whom to put their trust. I think of so many young people, especially, who continue to put the same question to Jesus, “Are you the one or should we look for another.” So many people who seem disillusioned with organized religion as John the Baptist perhaps was with Jesus when things did not work out as he expected – people who question the churches, even the Catholic Church, who say they cannot go to church because of the hypocrisy they find there, worshipers who praise God on Sunday and then live the rest of the week as though God did not exist.

There may be some truth to what they say. The really unfortunate thing is that the people they perceive as hypocrites probably have not yet really experienced the presence of Jesus in their lives and so their worship on Sunday has very little meaning to them. On the other hand, the disillusioned, the seekers, the sincere seekers have not yet experienced him either and so they keep looking, here, there and everywhere and asking the same questions of Jesus, of Moses, of Buddha, of Mohammed, of Confucius, “Are you the one or should we look for another?”

In recent years, the question of disillusionment has been a particularly acute one for us in the Catholic Church. We are told that people are leaving the church in large numbers because they do not find real spiritual nourishment there. The sexual abuse scandals along with the way they have been handled by bishops have driven some away. There seems to be a big gap between the experience of the people in the pews and what they keep hearing from the hierarchy. Where they look for compassion and understanding they find judgment and condemnation. Bishops threaten and sometimes invoke excommunication or depriving people of the sacraments. I often wonder what Jesus would think of excommunication or refusing sacraments for any reason. From my reading

of the Gospels his attitude was one of forgiveness and inclusion and not of exclusion. Until that becomes our attitude as well we will continue to lose people and our young people will continue to look elsewhere to have their expectations fulfilled

Well you know, Advent is the season of hope. And this particular Advent we have great reason to hope that indeed all manner of thing will be well. That hope comes most of all in the person of Pope Francis who has caught the imagination of the world with his humility and compassion. *Time* magazine has named him the person of the year not just for Catholics but for all people of good will. I have had people come to me and say they had been away from the Church for many years, but have come back because of Pope Francis, the way he acts and the things he says. It seems to me he is simply talking and acting like Jesus. And in doing so he becomes a wonderful role model for all of us. From my reading of the Gospels Jesus' attitude was one of forgiveness and inclusion, never of exclusion.

And you know if we are to be the church of Jesus Christ, if we are to be the Body of Christ, we must all, with the grace of God, act like Christ. That's the secret of Pope Francis's remarkable effect upon the Church and even the whole world. When the Sermon on the Mount and the Parable of the Last Judgment become part of our lives – as they seem to have become for Pope Francis – then people will be able to come to us and see that, yes, indeed, Jesus is the one, and he is here, and we do not have to look for another.