

John Docherty, December 11, 2016

God's healing is at hand

The theme for this Advent season is “Walking in the way of God's heart”, and the focus for today's service is “God's healing is at hand.”

It's a promise, and, as is usually the case during Advent, it's a promise of what is yet to be, rather than a statement of what has already happened.

“God's healing is at hand.”

Given the health issues that dominate our lives and our community here at MFM, I could have taken this opportunity to focus on our yearning after good health and the ability to embrace life to its fullest.

I've chosen not to do that, partly because our needs are so intimate, so deeply personal, and so fraught with uncertain outcomes. I don't want to risk bringing a message that slips into trite expressions of hope that may ring hollow for those for whom the outcome may be painful.

I've also chosen not to do that because I think the theme has a larger, broader, more encompassing, intent with regard to God's desire for healing of humanity as a whole.

And I've chosen not to look too closely at the individual need for healing, because the scripture passage we read offers, I think, a much wider application of this notion of healing.

John the Baptist is one of those “larger-than-life” characters that populate the pages of this Book. He stands firmly in the long line of prophets who adopt unconventional behaviours to underline their message.

Take Isaiah, who went around naked for a while to foreshadow the fate that was to come to the Egyptians and Ethiopians who would be marched naked into exile at the hands of the king of Assyria.

Or Jeremiah, who wears a loincloth (aka underwear) for a while, without ever washing it, then takes this underwear and hides it in a rock until it rots, to make the point that the nation of Judah was rotten and good for nothing in God's eyes.

Or Hosea, who marries a prostitute, and names his daughter “Unloved”.

Or Ezekiel, who has visions in which he eats scrolls;
who lies for over a year beside a clay tablet;
who shaves his head and beard with a sword, then uses the cut hair to make various
points about what will happen to the people;
who leaves the city by digging a hole in the wall and sneaking out at night.

When John the Baptist comes along, he adopts a style that, while maybe a bit on the
radical side – he lives out in the desert; wears camel hair robes and a leather girdle; eats
locusts – is, on some level at least, the kind of behaviour that's expected of a Jewish
prophet.

It's not unlike the Doukhobors, who sometimes protested in the nude : it grabs your
attention.

Your message doesn't travel very far if no one is listening, and no one will listen if
they're bored by the message, or by the way it's delivered.

So the image *I* have of John the Baptist is of a man who's a bit on the wild side. The
picture is of someone with crazy hair, flashing eyes, and uncompromising principles.

A far more robust version of yours truly.

His message is direct, uncomplicated, and universal : repent! Repent and be baptized if
you want your sins to be set aside!

It's not particularly nuanced, and not particularly subtle. When Pharisees and Sadducees
come to him for baptism, he bellows at them : “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to
flee from the wrath to come?”

He's courageous to the point of recklessness. His preaching against Herod finally gets
him sent to prison, and he will ultimately be executed by beheading.

He's a strong character, and he has a strong appeal to the people of the day. And though
he *is* eventually executed, Herod is loathe to kill him, fearing the reaction of the people.

He's the kind of personality that draws a crowd.

He's the kind of personality that might conceivably be seen to be of Messianic material.
We don't have any reason to believe that he was directly threatening revolt, but, like
Jesus, he was a threat to the authorities nonetheless.

I suppose any popular figure with unpredictable tendencies and angry followers can give

rise to a heightened set of expectations that things are going to change, and a sense of discomfort on the part of those who might find themselves on the receiving end of his wrath.

John the Baptists is fiery, and when he sends his disciples to Jesus to ask if he's the One, it's easy to hear a hint of impatience or frustration in the question.

“Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?”

“Are you the One?”

It's a curious question in some ways.

Some commentator's struggle with trying to understand why John puts the question to Jesus, since he seems clearly to see himself as somehow subordinate to him. Certainly, at Jesus' baptism, John appears to have evidence enough of Jesus' importance, and in the Gospel of Luke he seems to have great faith that Jesus is, in fact, the one the people have been waiting for.

So why is he questioning things now?

One commentator suggests that “... it must be remembered that in the thought of the Baptist, the coming of the Messiah coincided with the Last Judgment, when the just would be delivered and the wicked destroyed. John is in prison for having had the courage of the prophets. And “the Messiah” remains silent. He seems impotent. Evil continues to triumph.”

And I think that's a fair starting point for understanding this passage : John, like everyone else in Israel, is waiting for a powerful Messiah. He's yearning after God's healing of the nation, and he assumes that the Messiah's coming will be accompanied by demonstrations of power that will shake the foundations of the world.

But John's sense of how that power will be demonstrated seems to incline more towards a dramatic and direct attack on the powers that be, and less on the subtlety of acts of mercy, compassion, and personal healing.

Lets not forget that John is in prison when he sends this question.

He's been faithful to his own call as he's understood it, and been unrelenting in calling everyone in the nation to repentance, in the tradition of all the prophets who preceded him.

And what does he get for his pains? He's imprisoned, and his very life is in the balance. And the One who's path he's been preparing, doesn't lift a finger to help him.

So I think it's not unreasonable to assume that in his question to Jesus he's seeking reassurance that he's been on the right path, along with perhaps an implicit suggestion that it's time for Jesus to act, if he is indeed the Messiah.

His own ministry seem may seem like a mockery and doomed to failure if Jesus is *not* the Messiah, and it seems that an ignominious end is in store for this man who has been Isaiah's voice crying in the wilderness.

And, I suppose, the action he's looking for involves freeing him from prison, toppling the corrupt structures that are governing the people, and instituting a new world order.

And although John's temperament would make the tone of the question very probably one of sharp impatience and implicit rebuke, I wonder if there isn't also a touch of confusion or even despair in his reaching out to Jesus.

Would it be unreasonable to hear in this question a longing for reassurance rather than an angry expression of impatience and frustration?

“Are you the one? Or is it someone else?”

I suspect it's a question most of us have asked at some point or other.

Is Jesus the one? Is he *really* the Son of God? Has he *really* set in motion something that will ultimately produce the kind of world God intended?

If you're here to worship, you've likely already answered that question for yourself, but in this season of Advent; in this time of yearning and waiting; I think it's fair to take stock and allow ourselves to again ask whether this Jesus is the one who will bring God's healing to a broken world.

Like John, I think we could be forgiven for wondering if we're on the right path. It's been two thousand years and we don't seem much closer to that world than John was.

Yes, in relative terms we live in a much safer world than the one John inhabited; life expectancies are much improved; we're far more interconnected than at any other time in history.

But I suspect that that general condition is little comfort to those caught in the various conflicts raging around the globe. They are still waiting for the promise of peace and

healing.

Mind you, I suppose that, too, is relative.

If any of you saw the video that was circulating last week of the ice-induced series of accidents on Beaver Hall Hill you will have seen the images of a bus sliding down the slope into a few cars that were already piled up. Another car then hits the bus, a second bus joins the party, a pickup then slides into the back of the second bus, a police car makes a graceful backwards glide into the pickup, and then, to add insult to injury, a snow plough/sander ploughs into the police car.

It's a great snapshot of life in Montreal in the first days of winter weather.

My assistant at RIVO is a woman from Syria. When that video went viral, she got a call from her family in Syria : “Are you okay?!” they wondered, panic in their voices.

“You're in Damascus”, she answered, “bombs are falling. Of course I'm okay. Are *you* okay.”

“Yeah, yeah”, they answered. “The bombs are normal, but what you're facing in Montreal ... are you okay?!”

So, we're still waiting for peace to reign, but we find a way to manage somehow. Life goes on while we wait for things to get better.

But we do long and hope for things to get better.

Like John, we want to know that we're on the right path. We want to know that we are walking in the way of God's heart.

But Jesus' answer to John's disciples is a little ambiguous.

He certainly doesn't respond with the direct and forceful answer that John may have hoped for. There is no promise of immediate judgment on sinners and the vindication of John and his followers. There isn't even a simple “yes, but you'll have to be patient”.

Instead, he tells John's disciples to just return and tell John what they've seen :

- the blind receive their sight
- the lame walk
- lepers are cleansed

- the deaf hear
- the dead are raised up
- and, finally, the poor have good news preached to them.

In other words, he seems to be saying “Isn't it obvious? Of course I'm the One, but you have to trust that I know what I'm doing : Blessed is he who takes no offence at me.”

Because, hidden in this response is an echo of Isaiah's prophecy that these things would all happen when the time was ripe. Healing would come to the blind, and the deaf, and the lame.

There is healing happening - not just healing in the physical, medical sense, but healing in the symbolic, wholeness sense, and we're going to heal this world one person at a time.

And if we were to look earlier in Matthew's Gospel, we'd get a hint regarding who in fact is going to bring about this change with Jesus' help :

- the poor in spirit
- those who mourn
- the meek
- those who hunger and thirst after righteousness
- the merciful
- the pure in heart
- the peacemakers
- those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake
- those who are persecuted and reviled on Jesus' account

This isn't a list of qualities that every one of us must have, and some of us will never fit into some of the categories mentioned.

But all of us should expect to find ourselves somewhere on the list at some point. I'm not saying I think it's an exhaustive list and that we all need to fit in somewhere at all times.

I'm suggesting that these are the kinds of people who will act in Jesus' name to bring wholeness to this world, and at some point the descriptions will intersect with us in our lives as we yearn for what is yet to be.

There will be times when we feel we are poor in spirit;

times when we mourn;

times when we are strong enough to be meek;

times when we hunger and thirst after righteousness;

times when we are merciful;

rare times when we are perhaps even pure in heart (or close to it);

times when we can be peacemakers;

there may even be times when we are persecuted for righteousness' sake, or are persecuted and reviled on Jesus' account

On those occasions, we may well reach out to Jesus to ask, “are you the One?” ... *am* I on the right path?”, and on those occasions, we will get the answer Jesus gave to John :

“look around you and see the signs of hope;
hear the good news that is preached to the poor.
God's healing is at hand.
Continue walking in the way of God's heart.”