

Matthew 11: 2 – 11

‘John the Baptist and doubts’

Introduction ...

This week we start with a searching question by John the Baptist, from what was (presumably) the dark dungeon in which he had been imprisoned by Herod. Perhaps that is what had triggered some dark thoughts. Had his ministry been in vain? Had he pointed his followers in the wrong direction when he directed them towards Jesus as the one who would follow him?

The term ‘dark night of the soul’ is closely associated with another John – John of the Cross, a 16th-century mystic – and it has become associated for many with an experience that involves profound challenges to a person’s sense of who they are and what they believe. In the original poem where John of the Cross introduces this term, he embraces the experience as a time of transformation and spiritual growth. It has been noted by many that seeds generally germinate in the dark, and indeed some require the harsh cold of winter to start the process. The point is that this can be true of spiritual growth too.

Sometimes it is only when we stop – or are forced to stop by some outside circumstance – that we allow ourselves to think. But thinking isn’t necessarily enough ... it was only when John (the Baptist) voiced his questions and had his followers convey them to Jesus that they could be addressed! However, Jesus – somewhat like a modern politician – didn’t directly answer the question. Rather, he gave John more food for thought. We don’t know what conclusion John came to before his grisly end. But it is clear that this hero of the faith was learning more about the God he served and the Messiah he prepared the way for, right up to that point.

For us too, we may never be the finished article. We may go through many dark nights of the soul on many issues. It is said that Mother Teresa of Calcutta felt herself to be in a ‘dark night’ from 1948 almost up until her death in 1997, with only brief interludes of relief along the way. It has also been said that we should not forget in the dark what we learned in the light. But let’s add to this that sometimes, we need to remember in the light what we have learned in the dark!

- Let’s note two other things also – which may help us when we’re in a ‘dark place’ or be something to offer to others who are in this kind of situation:
 - **John still has followers.** He may be in a perilous position and filled with doubts and fears, but there are still people who are willing to take risks to help him. It can be easy to forget that friends are still around ... we may even try to push them away ... but part of the help that God wants to give will come through other people. This really is true for us even when we find ourselves in ‘dungeons of doubt’ or experiencing the ‘dark night of the soul’.
 - **Jesus affirmed the part that John had played in preparing for his own ministry,** despite his diminished position and current doubts. Jesus used a quote from Isaiah about John, in addition to asking John to consider how Jesus’ ministry also fulfilled prophecies from Isaiah. Do we affirm those who helped form us in faith or served previous generations, even when they may feel that their day is done, or they feel that we are not doing things the right way?

Conclusion

Today's Gospel is a sobering reminder, if we needed one, about the reality of darkness and doubt – and for a committed servant of God. But it is also a reminder of Jesus and his ministry within darkness and doubt.

We don't know how John responded to the message his followers took back to him. But we can be inspired by Christians who have gone before us and talked about their own experience. Consider again the words of St John of the Cross, viewing his own 'dark night of the soul' as being a time of transformation and spiritual growth. This can only happen if we keep turning to Jesus, as John the Baptist did from prison - and listening to what Jesus says and does in reply.

Let's allow friends to remain close when we are struggling – as well as staying a good friend to others who are struggling. And – this Advent and Christmas could be a time when we affirm those who went before us and in some sense, prepared the way for us.

Amen.