

“Are You the One Who Is to Come, or Should We Look for Another?”

December 6, 2016 Gjergji Evangjeli

I find the Gospel reading for Gaudete Sunday to be particularly fascinating. If you follow along in Matthew’s gospel, Jesus is proclaimed to be the Son of God by John the Baptist in Matthew 3 and—after fasting for forty days—begins His public ministry by preaching and performing miracles. By Matthew 11, Jesus is reported to have performed dozens of miracles and—doubtless—there was much talk about the new traveling and healing teacher in Israel. On the other hand, things were not exactly looking up for John. While Jesus tended to the crowds, John languished in prison.

It is incorrect to say that the people of Israel were expecting an exclusively political Messiah who would restore Israelite independence and bring back a Davidic dynasty to rule over Israel, at least in the Second-Temple Period. However, it is also misleading to say that this expectation was absent from the hopes and expectations of many faithful Jews at that time. This view also seems to be supported by Scripture. References to God’s Chosen One overthrowing the oppressors of Israel abound in the Old Testament. The expectation of a militaristic messiah who would free Israel from the yoke of Rome would not be far-fetched.

St. John’s question to Jesus—by way of his disciples—is “Are you the one Who is to Come, or shall we look for another?” (Mt. 11:3). At this point, Jesus’ ministry has been active for some time. John himself has seen the Holy Spirit descend upon Jesus and he has testified that Jesus is the Son of God, but it seems that by this point, John is overcome with longing for a restoration of a Jewish kingdom. Or, perhaps, his point is simpler than that. Both Jesus and John know that John is being held behind bars unjustly and Jesus claiming the kingship from the unpopular rulers of the day would likely lead to John getting back his freedom.

The Lord’s response serves both to comfort and redirect John and his disciples. He says, “Go and report to John what you hear and see; the blind receive sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the Gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who does not take offense at me” (Mt. 11:4-5). He could have scolded them for doubting Him, but He does not. Instead, Jesus instructs the disciples of John to look around them, to see the suffering of so many being healed. The point behind this point seems to be that no one but the Messiah would be able to do those things.

Be that as it may, however, Jesus does not lead a successful campaign against the Romans. To Him, the question of the Roman occupation of Judea is of no consequence. So, how are we to interpret all those verses prophesying that the Messiah would save Israel from their enemy? The simple answer is that Rome was not Israel's ultimate enemy. While the brutality of the Roman regime cannot be overstated, it is nothing in comparison to the brutality of the true enemy of Israel and —by extension— to the true enemy of all mankind. Jesus' victory was not over Rome's evil, but over evil itself. He does not conquer Rome; He conquers the Devil and sin and death. The only reason why many would be unable to see the real enemy is because we are too dependent on our senses.

In our daily lives, this is a common occurrence. One verse that has always fascinated me in the Gospel of Matthew is Jesus' point that no parent whose child asks for bread gives them a stone (Mt. 7:9) as a way to show that God always does what's best for us. More often than not, however, we ask for stones and are disappointed to receive bread, or at least we ask for a sandwich and are disappointed to get a steak.

The birth of Christ is the ultimate example of this. As John's Gospel says, "He came into his own and those who were His own did not receive Him" (Jn. 1:11). Jesus was and is not received by many precisely because He is far more than we bargained for. Many people in His day—and many today—were not looking for the radical change that God brings. People were then and are now looking for someone to make things easier for them—ultimately, for someone to allow them to live their lives in peace and quiet. Jesus's vision—that is to say, God's expectation in our lives—could not be further removed from this. No one that is touched by Jesus is able to just go back to what they were doing. His Incarnation is a call to action, a call to discipleship, a call to mission. Our Lord and the Apostles often call us to be awake and vigilant. The Christian religion is not a religion of rest, at least in this sense.

Yet, paradoxically, Jesus also says, "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest" (Mt. 11:28). Not rest from our Christian duty, of course, but true rest, true tranquility of heart and mind, which only God can give. That rest that was always present in the Apostles and the saints of every age, regardless of how they were treated. It is the rest of knowing that we are loved by God, that even the hairs of our head are counted (Mt. 10:30), the knowledge that "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16). In God's radical love, we can truly rest, laying our heads at the foot of His manger, which held Him who stretched out the Heavens. Merry Christmas!