

## ADVENT THIRD SUNDAY YEAR A 2010 HOMILY

(Isaiah 36: 1-6a, 10; James 5: 7-10; Matthew 11: 2-11)

### DOUBTING JOHN

One of my oldest friends is a doubter. He has told me flat out that he just can't believe in Christ and his Church. He may believe in God, but that's as far as it goes. He is very interested in the history of the Catholicism in which he grew up, but it's not something he feels he can invest himself in.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ begins and ends with doubters. We are familiar with the "doubting Thomas" who could not believe that Christ had risen from the dead and needed to see his wounds as proof. Thomas, like the other disciples in the upper room, was really scared after Jesus was executed and he may well have thought "I could be next." But ultimately Thomas saw and believed and we remember him for his proclamation of his faith "My Lord and my God" which the nuns taught my generation to say in our hearts when the host and chalice are raised at Mass.

But today's gospel from St. Matthew seems to portray John the Baptist as a doubter too. John is in prison and that would have been a pretty horrible experience in Jesus' day – far worse than most experiences of being imprisoned in the modern world. John had already baptized his cousin Jesus and had heard the Father's voice proclaim him as the beloved son. John had also acknowledged Jesus as the one whose sandals John was not worthy to carry. Nevertheless here in this gospel passage, John sends some of his disciples to ask if Jesus is the one – that is, the Messiah – or should people wait for another. Perhaps prison had gotten to John and his spirits were so low that his faith faltered. This would certainly be understandable.

John the Baptist and Thomas the Apostle are not the only doubters in the history of Christianity. If we are honest, wouldn't most of us have to admit that we have had our doubts about God and his goodness? I revealed in my Thanksgiving Day Homily this year that I had big issues with God when my best boyhood friend died of Lou Gehrig's disease. And although doubt is not one of my serious spiritual challenges, I have to admit that there have been a few times when I am at the altar saying the words of consecration when a little teeny wondering enters my heart and asks: "Is this all just a big joke? Does this bread and wine truly become the living Christ?" This doubt passes quickly and God's grace strengthens my faith. But what I have described has happened once in a while; and for just an instant, I question whether my life as a priest is meaningless and based on a lie.

What sustains my faith above all else is hearing and seeing what Jesus says in answer to John's disciples in Matthew's Gospel today: the blind regain their sight and the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear and the poor have the good news preached to them and (as Isaiah adds in our first reading) the lame leap like a stag and the tongues of the mute sing. Of course, I am not usually talking about what are commonly called miracles – although I believe in miracles and have even seen some. No, I am just talking about the everyday goodness that I see in our St. Paul parishioners and other Christians as they go about performing wonders of love and compassion. The work of Jesus continues to this day and is a testimony to everyone that God exists and is at work in his Son's disciples.

I am thinking of those who faithfully visit the sick and the poor and treat them with unspeakable kindness and actually relieve their pain. I am thinking of those who take the time just to be with the lonely and the sad and those who mourn and listen as they pour out their hearts. I am thinking of those who stretch themselves and reach across cultural and racial divides to bring greater understanding and unity to our community and our world. I am thinking of those who get over petty hurts and maybe sometimes big harm and have the courage to forgive – or maybe, conversely, have the courage to ask for forgiveness. I am also thinking about those moments when doubt is dispelled by the simple faith of children. A mother recently told me that her middle school aged son wondered about God's goodness because of some terrible tragedy he had found out about. But then, she said, the boy told her that he saw some angels who assured him that God loved him and everyone and that it was ok to trust this God. These are the things that prove to me that my whole life is bound up with my faith in God. And these are the things Jesus was talking about in today's gospel to John's disciples – the things that prove Jesus is The One.

Well, we all know that John the Baptist got over his doubts and gave his life for the truth – which is Christ. My doubting friend is also coming around. You see, his son married a very Catholic girl and they are raising some beautiful Catholic children. My friend sees the good they do and he is impressed and he even goes to church sometimes. And his elderly and very patient Mom prays for him – as do I every day. So he really doesn't stand a chance of remaining an unbeliever. It's just a matter of time.

Advent is the time to grow in faith. And doubt plays a role in this growth. Today on Gaudete Sunday (the Sunday of rejoicing that Christmas is so near), we are happy that God is patient with us. And when we go out into the desert of our poor and broken world (as Jesus remarks in our gospel that John the Baptist did), we will see by grace all the prophets of God's goodness who by their love prove that God is incarnate in our midst. The child of Bethlehem grew up and died of love. Then he asked us, his Body, to carry on his work. When we do so with humility and simplicity, we make believers out of doubters.