

“The disappointing Jesus” Matthew 11:2-11

“Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” And Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.”

As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings’ houses. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written, “‘Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.’ Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”

Grace to you and peace from God the Father and the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

Jana’s Mum was a doctor. She often used to remind us that healthy people dream about many things, while sick people mostly about one. What is it? They want to be healthy. I guess that's something that most of us could relate to quite easily.

How annoying, how challenging, how disheartening and often how painful and uncomfortable it is when you need to battle with your health issues. How difficult it can make our lives, how much less enjoyable.

The same is true if there is a sickness in the family. If there is someone whose health is a constant burden for others, demanding ongoing attention, hindering what otherwise would be possible and desirable.

Now, just picture all of those crowds of people who streamed to Jesus. Can we possibly imagine the abundance of joy that they experienced? “The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear.”

You may know of someone who is blind, you know how lost and how vulnerable they may feel. How challenging it is having physical impediments that restrict our ability to move and participate in the fullness of life activities.

Or having an incurable disease that keeps us isolated from society. Or not being able to hear the voices of our loved ones. And suddenly, you can see, your eyesight or the eyesight of your loved ones is restored.

They are made well, able to enjoy what it means to use your healthy body, to be welcomed into the society and to participate, to hear the sounds of songs and birds chirping. What a joy! It is difficult even to imagine, if we haven’t experienced it ourselves.

But there was more, even the dead were raised up. How could that be possible? Who would have that power over life and death? Who could believe it? Unless, you witness it with your own eyes. Unless it happens in front of tens and hundreds of eyewitnesses.

And there was more. The poor had good news preached to them. It seems that here, similarly as in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is referring to the poor in spirit. The spiritually poor, those who objectively are in a spiritual need. What need?

We can say that spiritually poor are those who don't have those gifts that only the Holy Spirit can give us. What are they? They don't have trusting relationships with their Saviour. They don't have God as their loving Father. They don't have the assurance of the forgiveness of all their sins and good conscience.

They don't have the hope of eternal life with the Triune God in His New Creation. They don't have the joy and sense of security that comes when we walk with God. And similarly, as the blind of the lame, the poor in spirit can't change that on their own. They need someone to help them. Who are those poor in spirit? We are.

We all fall into this category. And to such the Good News were preached. Jesus said they were blessed. Blessed in the Gospel according to Matthew is almost a synonym to saved, or redeemed. This is what the spiritually poor were getting, the Good News, the Spirit filled words, salvation, God's grace, His forgiveness, they received God's Kingdom.

What was happening was something deeply familiar for those people, a fulfillment of a prophecy by Isaiah which they had heard so often: **"They saw the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God... The eyes of the blind were opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; the lame man leapt like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sung for joy."**

Now all of that was happening before the eyes of so many. Why would anyone doubt that they were witnessing the fulfillment of what Isaiah had prophesied? Jesus from Nazareth must be the One! What was John, or what were his disciples thinking?

Why would anyone doubt Jesus' identity? Because... they had a good reason. They were waiting for the Anointed One, for the Messiah to come, and there was something that was missing. The Old Testament prophecies were quite clear, as Isaiah put it:

"Be strong; fear not! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you." Did you hear? He will come with vengeance, He will come with recompense, He will save you!

Isaiah and many others had foretold the coming of the Messiah as the day of Judgment, when the cup of God's wrath will be poured on the fallen world. When the unjust will receive what they deserve, when the wicked will be punished. Good things...

Now, where was God's judgment on the wicked? Where was God's salvation for the good people? John the Baptist, the believed forerunner of the Messiah, was in prison. Who knows what will happen with him. And Jesus hadn't moved a finger about that.

“Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” Do you ever have doubts in God? Jesus, are you for real? What are you waiting for? Why don't you intervene? Why do you permit false teachings to destroy your Church?

Why are Lutheran Churches around the world falling away dreadfully? Why don't those in leadership positions stand up for the whole counsel of God? Why are your faithful servants bullied by those they try to serve and driven out of their ministry by bureaucrats in comfy offices? Ostracized, forgotten...

Do you know how many faithful pastors have left the LCA or even the ministry during the last few years? The growing list is shockingly long and their stories are heartbreakingly sad. How can that be? Jesus, do you even care? Are you the One?

Why don't you come with vengeance and recompense? Where is the cup of your wrath? Why are the wicked getting away? Why should your faithful suffer injustice? These may be our questions, and similarly it was for those disciples of John the Baptist.

The truth is, that God did come with vengeance. He did bring His recompense. He poured out His cup of wrath. All of that did, indeed, happen. But... He didn't pour it out on the wicked, He didn't bring His recompense to the evil and unjust, He didn't come to judge the unjust and the rebellious, He didn't destroy the unrighteous.

For if He did that, He would have needed to wipe out everyone. John, His disciples, the crowds of Jesus' followers. Me. You. All the people you know and love. Everyone. For we all fall into those categories when the thoughts and desires of our hearts are brought into the open before our God. Make no mistake... there is no exception.

God did pour out His cup of wrath, He brought His vengeance in all its severity, without holding anything back. But He did not execute His judgment on us, instead, all of that fell on the Lamb. On the innocent Lamb without any blemish. On Jesus Christ, God's Son.

The judgment that we deserved came down on the Suffering Servant. He took the place of evildoers. Mine and yours. As Isaiah wrote elsewhere: **“But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities. Upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.”** (Is 53:4-5)

Jesus Christ took upon Himself what we deserve. Me. You. Entire human race. So that we could hear the Good News proclaimed to us – that all your sins are forgiven, and that you can have peace with God, that He looks at you with favour. Here we are, lucky beneficiaries of God's self-sacrifice. Poor in spirit, made incredibly rich by God's grace.

“And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.” Blessed you are if you are not put off by the strange work of God in Jesus. Blessed, meaning, saved you are. What you could not do on your own, Jesus has done for you.

He desires that all people are saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. All the wicked people, unjust people, unfaithful people, rebellious people; all who in the depth of their hearts are just like us. Poor in spirit, in need of the Good News of God's grace.

There is something I wanted to ask you as we conclude our today's meditations. Do you know who is greater than John the Baptist? Do you know? You are! Yes, you are. Each one of you, who cling to Jesus Christ as your Redeemer and Lord.

How can that be? How could we be greater than John? John wasn't like a reed shaken by the wind. He wasn't afraid to speak the truth even to those in power, and, yes, he paid for that with his life. Are we so courageous, so faithful? You know the answer.

How can we possibly be greater than John? John wasn't dressed in soft clothing. Put it otherwise, he was not bound by a comfortable environment, fearing that he may lose some of the privileges if he said something unpopular.

Can we do that? Do we have the guts to stand like John did? You know the answer. How can we be greater than John? For he was a prophet, more than that, he was the one who stretched his arm, pointed his finger and announced:

"Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" He was the one of whom Jesus said: **"This is he of whom it is written, 'Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you... Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist.'"**

How can we be greater than John? Because **"the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John."** That's you. Sure, there was no one greater than John in this age. But you already belong to the age to come. You have received God's Spirit.

You already are made children of God; you already are heirs of God's Kingdom. You are the poor in spirit who are now exalted, and filled with good things of God. You are greater than John, not by your own efforts, of course, but by virtue of God's grace.

We may doubt and question how Jesus Christ runs this world and His Church. We may be even disappointed by how He does it. But we do know that this Jesus has taken our place in God's judgment. We know that He has brought His Kingdom among us.

We know that He has called us, the poor in spirit, by the Gospel and have enlightened us with His gifts, we know that we have been made greater than John the Baptist. What is left for us? To doubt? To complain? No!

To rejoice and be thankful, to praise our God for everything He has done for us, and to do whatever we can to bring this Good News even to the end of the world.

Amen.