

DISAPPOINTMENT

December 16, 2007

Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr

Life is just one big disappointment after another.

Well, not really, but certainly there are times in the life of each one of us when we do have disappointments, in work, in love, in friends, in health, in family tragedies and there are times when we disappoint others who don't expect that from us.

Picture for a moment John the Baptist in Herod's prison. He stirs from a fitful sleep and kicks at a rat nibbling at the thongs of his sandals. He takes a bite of stale bread crust and sips from a ladle of turgid water. Out of the shadows he hears the murmurings of other prisoners. One of them asks John, *What're ya' in for? Rape? Murder? Robbery?*

John the Baptist thinks deeply about this question because he himself would like to know and because he knows that telling a cell full of prisoners that he's in there for preaching, or better yet, because he denounced the way of life of the man who put him

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there, ought to get more than a few chuckles. He doesn't fit into the prison society anymore than he fit into traditional society.

Before this, John had pretty much felt assured about his life as an *action prophet*, who had both announced the word of the Lord and led a popular movement of repentance. But now the doubts, like the rats at his feet begin to gnaw at his soul. The thunderous voice, which had convinced hundreds in a single day to repent and be cleansed of sin in the River Jordan, remains silent. The prisoners will get no answer.

The clear call he had received from God and had obeyed in the desert, has now dimmed in the stark numbness of imprisonment. This fiery prophet who had proclaimed with abandon and compelling certainty, *Repent for the Kingdom of heaven has come near*, must wonder *what kingdom and how near?* Whereas many had before thought of him as the

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returned Elijah, the forerunner of the Messiah, those same folk must wonder who he *really* is. And so must John, himself. His life and ministry have been radically put in question. Where is God? Have Herod and the Jerusalem establishment triumphed? Has it all been in vain? Was he just another pretender prophet whose message had captured the imagination of the masses for a while, but had proven, in the long run, as empty as the Judean wilderness from which he had come? Would it be too much to imagine that John at this hour in his cell, like Jesus on the Cross, might have quoted the Psalmist: *My God, my God why have you forsaken me* (Ps 22:1)?

Talk about disappointment! This is not the picture of a supernatural faith hero, filled with stony resolve and tranquil with certainty. This is the picture of one who appears to have lost his purpose in life and so it is that John told some of his disciples, during visiting hours, to go find Jesus and ask him, *What gives? Are you the*

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one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?

(Mt. 11:v.2) In a very real sense, John asks this life-determining, life-validating question on behalf of all of us: *are you Jesus, the One, or should we look for another?*

This is the problem. Despite our acceptance of Jesus as the Son of God, we still encounter pitfalls and disappointments and have our own doubts. We expect that having experienced the reality of God, we will never again be unreasonable, selfish or anxious, or harbor any of the crippling attitudes, which we recognize as such when we *listen* to God. We expect to be living in a Messianic age, in which sighing and sorrow are no more. John was right when he said, *The Kingdom of Heaven has come near*. If he expected the complete end of the old world and its selfish ways to occur immediately, he was wrong. Deserts and sighing and sorrows are still with us.

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So, in a real sense, John, deep within Herod's jail is a prototype of Advent hope. He lives in a lightless world between what is and what is hoped for. He is captive and, in the void of his captivity, he looks for a deliverer. Even though he is *more than a prophet*, he still isn't spared the agonizing doubt, or hunger for saving truth. Like the rest of us, he *needs* a savior.

If Advent does not remind each one of us of this same need, if Santa and holiday cheer provide a cultural eggnog to keep us from feeling this need, the spiritual significance of the Incarnation has been lost. A long dead and very fine priest of the Church once wrote, *We are not part of a nice, neat creation set in motion by a loving God; we are part of a mutinous world where rebellion against God is the order of the day.*

Jesus sends to John his answer and it's interesting that he does not tell John, authoritatively and decisively, *I am the Messiah*. He invites John to consider what his

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messengers can see and hear, because it is only in the encounter with Jesus and the experience of *his* power to release and restore that people come to deep faith.

Who experiences this ultimate mystery? Is it the well-put-together, the self-satisfied, the fulfilled, the competent and the content? No. It is, like John, the overpowered, the undone, the disconnected, the defeated, and the disappointed. *They* are the ones who, because they are *poor in spirit*, can enter the Kingdom of Heaven through Jesus.

Sometimes we, like John the Baptist, seem to lose our vision of who Jesus is. If we open our eyes to the reality of Christ, our vision becomes clear again. It's something to rejoice about as believers that we can, by God's grace, boldly affirm our faith without compromise, clearing away the things that hinder us in our spiritual growth. We must open *our* eyes and ears.

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We must with *our* lives proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God, the Nativity, the coming of Christ, the coming of *our* Messiah.

AMEN.