Spirituality
Pencil Preaching





by Pat Marrin

View Author Profile
patrickjmarrin@gmail.com.

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“Blessed is the one who takes no offense in me” (Luke 7:23).

Isaiah 45:6b-8, 18, 21c-25: Luke 7:18b-23

The Christmas story has its own poignancy because of the hardships and dangers surrounding the birth of Jesus. But before we leave Advent’s themes, today’s Gospel focuses on the profound poignancy of John the Baptist’s final days. Sent to preach repentance in advance of God’s wrath, John fulfilled his mission by baptizing the people and identifying Jesus as God’s judge. But on the eve of his death, sitting in a dungeon under King Herod’s place, John began to wonder if he had pointed to the wrong person.

John had expected a fierce and righteous prophet, but Jesus’ ministry was all about healing and forgiveness, love and mercy. He sends disciples to ask him, “Are you the one to come, or should we look for another?” Jesus answers by fulfilling Isaiah’s image of a different kind of Messiah, one who offers God’s mercy with healing, compassion and forgiveness, not judgment and threats.

We are not told if this reassured John, but Jesus praises him with a new beatitude: ”Blessed is the one who takes no offense at me.” John, the greatest of the prophets up to that time, the greatest person ever born, may have in fact been confounded by Jesus, but he fulfills his role within the old dispensation of Law by showing his inability to grasp the new dispensation of Grace revealed by Jesus. Like Moses, John points to the promised land but does not enter it. Like his parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth, he has kept the law but is still incomplete.

With a telling metaphor, John enters eternity headless. What he could not conceive with his mind he accesses with his heart at the moment of his death. The leap from human righteousness in the Law to receiving the divine gift of love is a distance only Mercy can bridge. Jesus is more than a judge; he is the divine-human bridge to God. Our escape from sin and death by our own effort is impossible without him.

Advent prepares us to grasp the Incarnation by drawing us into the same mind-bending, heartbreaking transition that defied John the Baptist's understanding of who God was. He was formed in the desert to recapitulate the history of salvation through the Exodus, the Law, the Exile and Return to renew the rituals of sacrifice and purification. But Jesus revealed a God whose love was so overwhelming and pre-emptive that no human effort could merit it. Instead, it was a gift available to everyone. The proud could reject it but the fullness of life in God and in the Beloved Community was open to all.

Jesus came to reveal this, to pursue sinners, to save the lost and to love even his enemies in order to show the world what God is really like. This is the Gospel. Blessed are those who are not offended by it.

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