

**ADVENT III (DEC 12,2010): ISAIAH 35:1-6, 10; JAMES 5:7-10; MAT 11: 2- 11**

Nathaniel Hawthorne was an American writer. When he died in 1864 he had on his desk the outline of a play he never got a chance to finish. The play centered around a person who never appeared on stage. Everyone talked about him. Everyone dreamed about him. Everyone waited for his arrival. But he never came. All kinds of minor characters described him. They told everybody what he would do. But the main character never appeared. -The Old Testament is something like Nathaniel Hawthorne's play. It too ended without the main character's putting in an appearance. Everyone talked about the Messiah, everyone awaited his arrival. But he never came in the Old Testament period. In today's reading, we hear Isaiah describe what the Messiah would do by bringing salvation to all mankind. Today's gospel tells us that when the real messiah came, even the last prophet and the Messiah's herald, John the Baptist, could not believe that he was the expected Messiah.

The common theme running through today's readings is one of joy and encouragement, and they stress the need for patience in those awaiting the rebirth of Jesus in their hearts and lives. Today is *Gaudete* Sunday because today's Mass begins with the opening antiphon: "Rejoice in the Lord always." Today we light the rose candle, and the priest may wear rose vestments, to express our joy in the coming of Jesus as our savior. The prophet Isaiah, in the first reading, encourages the exiled Jews in Babylon to believe that God is going to save them and transform their lives. In the second reading, James the Apostle encourages the early Christians to be patient, "*because the coming of the Lord is at hand.*" Finally, in today's Gospel reading, Jesus encourages John the Baptist to cast away the popular political expectations about the Messiah and simply to accept his healing and preaching ministry as the fulfilling of the messianic prophecy of Isaiah.

Scripture scholars over the centuries have wondered why John sent his disciples to ask Jesus if he were the one who was to come. There are two possible explanations: 1) John knew that Jesus was the Christ and, as a prisoner, he wanted his disciples to follow Jesus as their new master. So he sent them to ask Jesus this question and presumed that, once they had met Jesus, they would see for themselves that he was the Messiah and so would become followers of Jesus. 2) John began to doubt Jesus' identity as the promised Messiah. The silent healing, preaching, saving, and empowering ministry of Jesus was a surprise to John and to those who expected a fire-and-brimstone Messiah. Besides, Jesus had not yet fulfilled John's prediction that the One-to-come would baptize the repentant in the Holy Spirit. Nor did Jesus conform to popular Jewish beliefs about a warrior and a political Messiah who would bring political, social, and economic deliverance to Israel. Instead, Jesus pronounced blessings on the poor in spirit, the meek, and peacemakers (5:1-11). He called his disciples to love their enemies (5:42-48). He warned his disciples not to judge others (7:1-5). For John, these teachings might have seemed to weaken rather than to strengthen the Messiah's cause. Furthermore, Jesus moved away from Jerusalem, the home of the Temple and the

center of religious authority, and began his ministry in Galilee among the common people (4:12). This may have been why John sent his disciples to clarify his doubt, asking: "*Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?*"

From a theological perspective, this entire episode helps us understand how the experience of a faith crisis can play a role in our spiritual and emotional development. If John the Baptist, even after having had a direct encounter with Jesus the Messiah, could question, doubt and revise his faith, then so can we. Each of us has had times when we doubt God's love and care for us, times when we feel uncertain about following the Lord. And Jesus gives us the exact same answer he gave John: Look back over your life. Recall the wonderful things you have seen the Lord do. Hold fast to your faith, even when it doesn't make a lot of sense. Eventually, you too will be vindicated.

Remember: Despite John's doubts, Jesus still had very kind words for him: "Among those born of women there has been none greater than John the Baptist". (Mt. 11:11). And he will be just as pleased with us as we hold firm in faith!

*"Thank you, Jesus, for revealing yourself to me. Lord, I believe in you. Help me t hold fast to you."*

### **Joke of the Week**

A man who thought he was John the Baptist was disturbing the neighborhood, so for public safety, he was committed. He was put in a room with another crazy one. The new inmate immediately began his routine, "I am John the Baptist! Jesus Christ has sent me!" The other guy looked at him and declared, "I did not!"