



**Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York**

The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, OBE, DD, *Rector*
John Scott, LVO, D. Mus., *Organist and Director of Music*
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, December 16, 2007
The Third Sunday of Advent (Gaudete)

Festal Eucharist
at 11am

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, Rector

on
Isaiah 35:1-10 and
Saint Matthew 3:1-12

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CHRIST THE WARRIOR

“Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?”

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

John the Baptist today asks the question of all questions, asks it as a friend not an adversary, of Jesus. Are you the Messiah, or should we look for someone else? John had preached with clarity the coming of the Messiah, an article of faith for orthodox Jews of the day; about that there was no doubt. The question: Is Jesus of Nazareth that Messiah? In other words, is it right for us to call him Jesus Christ? Remember that Christ is not his surname; it is his title. Is it his right title?

John was in prison. Herod Antipas had imprisoned John because John had said it was not lawful for Herod to have his brother's wife. That would be Herodias, a wicked witch sort of a character, who nursed a grudge against the prophet that was not satisfied by his imprisonment. To make things worse for her, Herod was interested in John as a prophet and took him seriously if not enough to repent. Herodias got her opportunity at Herod's birthday party. Herodias' seductive daughter Salome danced for Herod, who appears to have been a little drunk and rashly promised the girl anything, to the half of his kingdom. Salome conferred with Mom and returned asking for the head of John the Baptist on a plate.¹

So John the Baptist's question was pressing for him, and he wanted to give a lead to his many followers. By the way, the first century Jewish historian Josephus confirms what the Gospels say about John's huge following and tells us that John was imprisoned (and beheaded) in Herod's dungeon of Machaerus on the eastern shore of the Dead Sea.

Why did John need to put the question to Jesus? Why does Saint Matthew, who tells the story of Jesus' baptism by John and John's testimony at the time to Jesus, think this question at this point in his Gospel is important?

¹Mt 14:1ff; also Mk 6:14ff and Lk 9:7ff. Herod Antipas is aka Herod the Tetrarch, brother of Archelaus (aka “Herod the Ethnarch”) and Philip, to each of whom Herod the Great, supported by Caesar Augustus, bequeathed a portion of his realm. The New Bible Dictionary, pp. 521-523.

Would not the Messiah be willing and able to smite such a corrupt tyrant as Herod; to free one of his saints from prison and execution? What did we hear to great effect the other night in Mr. Handel's Messiah concerning these earthly kings—"Thou shalt dash them with a rod of iron; thou shalt break them in pieces like a potter's vessel." (Ps 2:4)

Jesus' answer to John's question invokes prophecies from several passages in Isaiah concerning the Messiah,² including today's first lesson, but Jesus excludes references to worldly force. "Go 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 he who takes no offense at me." This is a description of a healer, a wonder-working restorer, a bestower of life and hope. Further, it seems that Saint Matthew understands and means us to understand blindness, lameness, uncleanness, deafness, and death in the fullest possible senses – physically, spiritually, symbolically, allegorically, literally, in time and for all eternity.

It is not that Jesus denies the notion of the Messiah as the great Conqueror, the Warrior *Christus Victor*. It is that his war is to destroy the works of the devil, who distorts and destroys human life; to overcome death itself; and bring about a new creation. This is not just a military coup in Palestine. This is an entire cosmos brought into the Kingdom of God. This Thursday evening, the boys of the choir will sing Benjamin Britten's Ceremony of Carols, with the sixteenth century martyr-priest Robert Southwell's poem "This Little Babe." It describes The Messiah's warfare perfectly:

"This little Babe so few days old is come to rifle Satan's fold;
All hell doth at his presence quake though he himself for cold do shake;
For in this weak unarmèd wise the gates of hell he will surprise.

"With tears he fights and wins the field, his naked breast stands for a shield;
His battering shot are babish cries, his arrows looks of weeping eyes,
His martial ensigns Cold and Need and feeble Flesh his warrior's steed.

"His camp is pitchèd in a stall, his bulwark but a broken wall;
The crib his trench, haystacks his stakes; of shepherds he his muster makes;
And thus, as sure his foe to wound, the angels' trump alarum sound.

"My soul, with Christ join thou in fight, stick to the tents that he hath pight.
Within his crib is surest ward, this little Babe will be thy guard.
If thou wilt foil thy foes with joy, then flit not from this heavenly Boy."

From cradle to cross to grave, this is our Warrior, *Christus Victor*, *Yahweh Sabaoth*, the Lord God of Hosts. *Christ crucified is the conquering hero.* Everything in the old prophecies is fulfilled beyond all imagining. John the Baptist would die in prison, just as Messiah would be crucified. But not an iota, not a dot, of the oracles of the Law and the Prophets, would fall to the ground. Nor would John the Baptist's role as Messiah's forerunner be frustrated in the least; indeed, as Jesus himself said, he is "Elijah who is to come." For Jesus and his Kingdom so far surpasses even the greatest prophet's human imagining, that "he who is least in the kingdom of heaven" is greater in stature, greater than Isaiah, Elijah and John; a little child in the kingdom can lead the way – beginning with the Baby in the manger.

As the great Christmas holiday rushes upon us, let remember what caused it all and what always lies beneath its surface. A Child is born in Bethlehem. His dislocation from Nazareth and birth in Bethlehem by the decree of Caesar Augustus is connected to his execution under Pontius Pilate. John the Baptist's predicament under Herod points to the same great truth; it does not end

² Isaiah 35; 20:19; 61:1, as cited in *Sacra Pagina*, The Gospel of Matthew, Daniel J. Harrington, SJ, pp. 154-162.

in failure and disappointment, all appearances to the contrary – far from it. John's beheading in prison is his glory as Christ's forerunner. Christ's death on the cross has "rifled Satan's fold."

The greatest gift of all is the Christ. All the heart-breaking questions of life in this vale of tears find their Yes in him. The Child born in Bethlehem is the One. He died, and behold, he lives. Come what may, Christ was born to save, to heal, and yes, to win the battle of life. All shall be well.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.