

# The signs of the kingdom

Isaiah 35.1-10 | Psalm 146.4-10 | James 5.7-10 | Matthew 11.2-11

## READING: MATTHEW 11.2-11

*2 When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples 3 and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" 4 Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: 5 the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. 6 And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." 7 As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? 8 What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. 9 What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 10 This is the one about whom it is written, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' 11 Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. (NRSV)*

## PRAYER

May the words of my mouth  
and the meditations of all our hearts  
be acceptable in your sight,  
O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.  
**Amen.**

## SERMON

### *I. ADVENT: A TIME OF EXPECTATIONS*

Dear friends in Christ!

Imagine Advent as a walk through a mountainous landscape. The final destination being Christmas. Concerning our walk this Third Sunday of Advent is like being on the top of a mountain from where you can already see some of the shapes of the nativity, Christmas, lying like a beautiful city in an amazing valley ahead of you. Half of the way of Advent has already been completed. That is the reason why this Sunday is also called ***gaudete*** which means simply ***rejoice***.

In a mountainous country like Austria it is easy to imagine a wonderful view from the top of a mountain. Consider the expectations a wanderer has when half of the tour is done and the final destination seems within reach. Perhaps there is some sense of pride in the miles already covered. A warm inn with friendly people at the end of the trip would be wonderful. Of course, our wanderer cannot predict the future at this point of the journey. The uncertainty fuels the wanderer's expectations and assumptions. Expectations are one way of dealing with uncertainties about the future. But, would it be very disappointing if everything turned out differently than expected?

Advent is a time in which Christians prepare for the celebration of the birth of Christ in Bethlehem. It is a season during which we ponder the end of time, the return of Christ, and the final judgment.<sup>1</sup> These topics are connected to the expectations we have about the Messiah, such as justice and peace to name just two. Let's take a closer look at some of the expectations and themes of Advent that relate to today's world.

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1 Bieritz, Karl-Heinrich (2001): *Das Kirchenjahr, Feste, Gedenk- und Feiertage in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 2<sup>nd</sup> revised edition, Beck, p. 202.

## II. DISAPPOINTED EXPECTATIONS CONCERNING THE FIRST COMING OF CHRIST

First, there are our preparations for Christmas. For many people today this means a complex mixture of stress, being overwhelmed, but also expectant anticipation.

In an article I recently read an author described 6 expectations that people have when they return home for Christmas:

1. *Visiting family will be exciting and relaxing.*
2. *People will be excited to see me.*
3. *Everyone will get along.*
4. *I'll spend lots of time with my friends.*
5. *I'll have enough time to do every Christmas activity that I want to.*
6. *I'll host perfect Christmas parties.<sup>2</sup>*

That would be a wonderful Christmas, wouldn't it? But is it real? Ask yourself.

I suspect that some of you laughed to yourselves hearing this list. The headline of the article read "6 expectations that will ruin your holidays this year"<sup>3</sup>.

The problem is that many people have very high and often unrealistic expectations. They put themselves under pressure because everything has to be perfect. The smallest change in the usual holiday routine can trigger a great sense of failure. Time pressure is often enormous because so many things still have to be done at the last minute. In many families, nerves are on edge even before the festival begins. Unfulfilled expectations can indeed trigger crises. For many families this is a bitter reality every year at Christmas.<sup>4</sup>

Unfulfilled expectations are even at the heart of today's gospel. At first Matthew tells us about the disciples of John. They ask Jesus on behalf of John, "*Are you the one*

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2 <https://www.cru.org/us/en/train-and-grow/life-and-relationships/holidays/christmas/6-expectations-that-will-ruin-your-holiday-this-year.html>

3 Id.

4 <https://www.paar-ehe-beratung.de/themen/weihnachten-ehekrise-familienstreit.html>

*who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"*<sup>5</sup> It seems as if John and his disciples had a different idea about the Messiah. It seems as if this Jesus did not live up to their expectations. In his preaching, John is more concerned with justice, while Jesus seems to focus more on God's mercy.<sup>6</sup> Jesus' focus made John wonder: Is this Jesus really the Messiah he has been waiting for?

Next the Gospel suggests that people also doubted John. Apparently he wasn't dressed well enough for someone of importance, and he probably smelled. Obviously, for some of his contemporaries these were not acceptable conditions for projecting authority. For them John was probably more like a beggar than a trustworthy messenger. For still others, he may have been suspect because he doubted Jesus.<sup>7</sup> Well, yes there were people who followed John. Others were irritated by this man from the wilderness. Jesus himself makes it clear that John is an important person, a prophet and indeed more than a prophet.<sup>8</sup>

It seems that, in both cases, unrealistic hopes hindered people to see the deep meaning of things. Their expectations leaving them blind and unable to interpret the present reality.

### *III. EXPECTATIONS CONCERNING THE END OF TIME*

Concerning the end of time, the return of Christ and the final judgment expectations are even more complex. Particularly the hope of the early Christians regarding the immediate return of Christ, in Greek the *parousia*<sup>9</sup>, has not yet been fulfilled.

Presently we can perceive an apocalyptic mood that sees the end of humanity within reach. Undoubtedly we live in serious times that require foresight and commitment. Climate crisis, war in Ukraine, inflation and rising prices are just a few keywords that characterize the atmosphere of today.

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5 Matthew 11.3

6 Carson, D. A. (2010): Matthew, The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Revised Edition, Zondervan, Ch. IV.

7 Matthew 11.8

8 Matthew 11.9

9 Bieritz: Das Kirchenjahr, p. 202.

The future is uncertain. And from the perspective of our crisis-ridden present, what lies ahead appears bleak. And people ask: Why is God silent? Why is God absent?

But is the present time really so hopeless? What is a Christian perspective that gives people hope in the here and now and prospects for the future?

#### IV. THE SIGNS OF THE KINGDOM

In today's Gospel we can discern a life-giving perspective. It is found in the answer Jesus gives John's disciples. This answer is: *"Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."*<sup>10</sup>

This is an invitation to John and his disciples to question their expectations concerning the Messiah and the Kingdom of God. It is an invitation to reconsider their perspectives. This Jesus may not be what John and his disciples hoped for. The world didn't completely change with a bang nor does it change that way today. But small positive and hopeful changes can be perceived.

A few chapters after today's Gospel passage Jesus compares the Kingdom of God to a small mustard seed.<sup>11</sup> This mustard seed is still very small, but it will grow into a big tree. Even if it is not yet clear what this tree, the kingdom, will look like.

The message of Jesus is a message of hope. The hope is that war, injustice, sickness and death will not have the last word, even if the present is challenging, even if the present seems bleak. Little but very real signs of the dawning of God's kingdom can be seen. Nevertheless, there are still many problems that need solving. Injustice didn't just disappear from the world. But in and with this Jesus there is a justified hope that the just and merciful God will reign in the end.

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<sup>10</sup> Matthew 11.4-6

<sup>11</sup> Matthew 13.31-32

What must we look for in order to recognize the signs of God's coming kingdom? Well, today's readings<sup>12</sup> point us to the signs to look for! They point out that whenever and wherever the situation of the poor, the sick and the outcasts improves, the beginning of the kingdom of God becomes apparent.

*V. SLOW DOWN, WATCH, LISTEN & ACT*

How can these insights help us during the second half of Advent? The middle of our Advent walk is truly the ideal place to make an assessment of how our keeping of Advent is proceeding.

My first suggestion for the second half of Advent is that we go a little slower so that we still have enough breath for the high festival.

A second suggestion: It is also good to question our expectations, in order to be able to accept everything that is coming as a gift. Then disappointed expectations will not spoil the joy of Christmas.

A third suggestion: When on a walk, it is good to follow the path carefully, so that the little wonders along the way are not overlooked in the midst of being so fixed on the goal. And there are already small wonders and signs of hope just among and around us. In the context of my work, I have noticed with admiration during the last few months just how many volunteers are involved in the parishes in Vienna. There are warming rooms, soup kitchens, free distribution of clothing, food distribution, and much more. There is indeed much goodwill among people and neighbourly care.

And in the distance we can already guess the destination of our Advent walk: Christmas. At Christmas, like every year, we will celebrate that God became flesh. We will celebrate that God has taken up residence in the middle of this world. This gives us strength and courage to make this earth liveable, knowing that the poor are not forgotten.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Isaiah 35.1-10 | Psalm 146.4-10 | Matthew 11.2-11

## VI. PRAYER

Let me close with a prayer from a monastery in Germany:

*Lord my God, open my eyes to your reality: for what you are doing and for what you want to do through me today. Let your kingdom come and your will be done - as in heaven, so in our parliaments and the corporate headquarters of our economies as well as in our schools, prisons, homes for the elderly and churches. And in my life too. Send your Holy Spirit to all of these for yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.*<sup>14</sup>

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**Summary:** *The kingdom of God started with Jesus as small as a seed. It is growing gradually but is already among us. In order to perceive it in the here and now we have to slow down and watch, and we have to question our expectations and our usual perspectives. Amelioration of the condition of the sick, poor, and outcasts is the hallmark of the dawning of God's kingdom.*

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13 Frere Roger (1995): Die Quellen von Taize, Liebe aller Liebe, revised new edition, Ateliers et Presses de Taizé, p 27-29.

14 [://amen-atmen.de/2022/10/03/die-voegel/](http://amen-atmen.de/2022/10/03/die-voegel/) (German translation by Frank G. C. Sauer)