

3rd Sunday of Advent, 11th December 2016. Canongate Kirk.

St Matthew 11:2 *Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?*

In 1926 an American preacher by the name of Dr James Allan Francis wrote the following reflection entitled One Solitary Life:

He was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in another obscure village, where he worked in a carpenter's shop until he was thirty, and then for three years he was an itinerant preacher. He never wrote a book, he never held an office, he never owned a home. He never had a family, he never went to college. He never put his foot inside a big city. He never travelled more than two hundred miles from the place where he was born. He did none of those things usually associated with greatness. He had no credentials but himself. He was only thirty three when the tide of popular opinion turned against him. His friends ran away, one of them denied him. He was turned over to his enemies and went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed to a cross between two thieves. While dying, his executioners gambled for his clothing, the only property he had on earth. When he was dead he was taken down and laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend. Nineteen wide centuries have come and gone and today he is the centre-piece of the human race, and the leader of the column of progress. I am far within the mark when I say that all the armies that ever marched and all the navies that ever sailed, and all the parliaments that have ever sat, and all the kings that ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of man upon earth as powerfully as has that one solitary life.

Apart from changing nineteen to twenty wide centuries, the words of Dr Francis still serve today as an eloquent answer to the question John the Baptist once asked from his prison cell and relayed by his disciples to Jesus *Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?* The answer comes, of course, with the benefit of hindsight that was not be shared by John the Baptist, who would not leave prison alive and therefore never see for himself the blind receiving their sight, the lame walking, the lepers cleansed, the deaf hearing, the dead being raised, nor hear for himself the good news brought to the poor; all of it – put together, as Dr Francis would say – evidence that the itinerant preacher that John had so recently baptised in the Jordan was indeed the one who is to come, that there was after all no other to wait for. Jesus himself said of John “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*”. And then he pays him the ultimate compliment. “Truly I tell you; among those born of women, no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist”. And then he takes it all away again “Yet”, he concludes, “the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he”. It is in itself an ideal summary of the enigma, the mystery, the bundle of contradictions that is John the Baptist. A messenger but not dressed in the finery that one would expect of a royal herald. Instead renowned for his outlandish garb, a rough coat of camel's hair, and his unusual diet of locusts and wild honey. You can understand how people might have been tempted to ask of John the Baptist the same question he would ask of Jesus. *Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?* But Jesus is confident that John was indeed the one who had come ahead of him, to prepare his way before him.

A man who happened to share his initials with John the Baptist was the twentieth century Scottish writer and public servant John Buchan. In 1912 his younger brother William contracted a deadly infection while travelling in the Himalayas and died aged

32. John Buchan was inspired to commit some of his intense feelings of loss to paper in a wonderful poem entitled *Fratri dilectissimo* (to my most beloved brother). In it he recalls the times they had spent roaming together as boys in the wilds of the Border hill country and concludes wistfully

*Dear heart, in that serener air, if blessed souls may backward gaze,
Some slender nook of memory spare for our old happy moorland days.
I sit alone, and musing fills my breast with pain that shall not die,
Till once again o'er greener hills we ride together, you and I.*

Jesus of Nazareth and John the Baptist were not brothers, but they were cousins, and having been born just a few months apart, they were reckoned to be close. Whether they played and roamed together as boys we can only speculate, but I can't help thinking that on hearing that John was in prison, Jesus would be inclined, like John Buchan, to spare a slender nook of memory for their old happy moorland days together, and feel intense sympathy for his friend and cousin now incarcerated and condemned, and sadness at the sure knowledge that he would never see him again. There is no indication however that John was feeling sorry for himself, even as he reflected on the wild outdoors taunting him beyond his prison walls. Having received word of what Jesus was doing, the miracles he was working and the good news he was bringing, John sent his own disciples to see for themselves and to prove to themselves that Jesus really was the one whose coming their master had proclaimed from the very beginning. Even in prison, John the Baptist was pointing people to Jesus. Even in his darkest hour he could sense the light that was approaching.

*Prophets foretold him, infant of wonder;
Angels behold him on his throne;
Worthy our Saviour of all their praises;
Happy for ever are his own.*

John was the last in a long line of prophets who foretold him, and how Isaiah's original vision in our Old Testament reading must have struck a liberating chord with him even as he languished in prison. "And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away".

John the Baptist saw beyond his own immediate suffering and weariness and sensed the fulfilment of the promises of joy and gladness that came with the child in the manger. As the season of the nativity comes once more upon us, let us ask like him, *Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?* And let us remember even amongst all the current uncertainties and anxieties about presidents and parliaments, and agreements and disagreements in the country and on the continent and all around the world *that all the armies that ever marched and all the navies that ever sailed, and all the parliaments that have ever sat, and all the kings that ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of man upon earth as powerfully as has that one solitary life.* Happy for ever are his own. And now may God bless to us this preaching of his most holy word, and to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be all praise and glory now and forever. Amen.