

Remember the old song, “love and marriage go together like a horse and carriage”?

Jesus and John the Baptizer are like that. Just as you can’t think of Martha without adding Mary, so the gospel writers always pair the cousins John and Jesus. Even in utero John pointed the way to Jesus – he moved so vigorously at Mary’s arrival that he caused his mother Elizabeth to declare,

“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!” Luke 1:42-45

And now as John is in prison and coming to the end of his ministry he is once again pointing to Jesus but this time he seems less certain, sending his disciples to ask “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” And Jesus responds, “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.”

Which is of course a direct quote from Isaiah except for that last line, “blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.”

Why would anyone take offense?

The word translated here as to take offense is **skandalízō** from which we derive the word scandal. A skandalon is something that makes you stumble or trip up. Is Jesus thinking that John or his disciples will be tripped up or scandalized by him?

If so, I think there may be two ways to interpret that, to understand why Jesus thinks that John might be offended. First, we can think differently about what Jesus just said; secondly we can imagine that now John is in prison he might feel that Jesus is taking advantage of his absence to start his own preaching ministry. Which might explain why Jesus began to talk to the crowds about John.

Let's start with what Jesus just said, "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." That last phrase is a little surprising, "the poor have good news brought to them" – wouldn't you expect the healing of poverty to be increased income not just good news?

Perhaps the healing of the blind, lame and so on is not just a medical healing but something quite different. Since it was assumed that if someone had an illness or a disability it was a punishment from God, could it be that Jesus is re-writing the whole narrative by proclaiming God's love for everyone? Is it possible that his healing was not about bodies but about God's love and care for the whole person? And of God loves and cares for those who are sick then their sickness cannot be a punishment for their sins or their parent's sins.

This then would be good news for the poor as well – that God's love is unconditional and for everyone. Yet it would be scandalous to those who have preached that God's wrath is to come on the unrepentant. Jesus' ministry would be a stumbling block to those pious and good-living folk who think that they can earn their way into God's love or that God is smiling on them because they are healthy and wealthy.

It is still good news today. It is Good News for all who feel outcast, for all who feel guilty, for all who feel ashamed.

But before I get carried away on that theme, let's take a look at what Jesus says about his cousin, John.

“What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 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.’

“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.”

We can see a contrast here between the asceticism of John and the luxurious lifestyle of Herod Antipas who has arrested John. Herod issued a coin with a picture of a reed on the back so Jesus reference to a reed shaken by the wind may have been a veiled reference to Herod. But the crowd, Jesus maintains, did not go into the wilderness to see royalty but a prophet and not just any prophet but the one who was preparing the way for Jesus.

With that last sentence, “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.” we might imagine that Jesus is trying to make John feel better even though he seems to give with one hand but take away with the other. John is behind bars, his preaching ministry is at an end and Jesus is doing the Messiah event very differently than he had imagined. He is not in a good place.

Yet Jesus proclaims him the greatest, “among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist.” Yet, yet...

Among those born of the Spirit, those in the kingdom of heaven, he is the least.

Is this a reference to the first being last, or is this a suggestion that John's day has passed, his way of understanding the working of God is over? That a new day is coming, one where Jesus shows us that God's love is unconditional?

A new day when even those we thought were stricken by God for their sins are forgiven and given new life? A new day when the people of God are charged and empowered to participate in the very work of Jesus the Christ?

This is how I read it, people of God... a new day is coming, yes a new day is here. We are no longer baptized with John's baptism, a baptism of repentance only, but we are baptized into Christ, into the Body of Christ, the Messiah whose good news brings healing and comfort and strength. Our baptism brings us into the new life of the Spirit where, marked as Christ's own for ever, we are empowered to participate in the great work of God, the redemption of creation.

This is no small thing, yet this is our vocation.

Sometimes we may feel like John the Baptizer, caught in the darkness of the sin matrix, wondering what God thinks God is doing, but even from his prison cell, John saw that in Christ God was doing a new thing, something he hadn't anticipated. And God is doing a new thing here, in us and among us, something we may not have anticipated. Something that will enable us to participate more fully in the reign of God. Something that will enable us to enroll others in the kin-dom of God.

For that, people of God, brings the flourishing of all beings, and that gives God joy.