

Today we hear that John the Baptist is in prison, the price he has paid for fearlessly living out his mission- calling sinners to account, even, apparently Herod, the sinner King of Judea. John must know his mission is soon to end and from his prison cell he reaches out to his cousin, Jesus.

It is worth recounting the human relationship of these two cousins John and Jesus. 32 or so years previous their expectant mothers, Elizabeth and Mary, had greeted each other with great joy in the course of their pregnancies, John leaped in his mother's womb in premature expectation that greatness lay in wait. Cousins, John and Jesus must have continued some sort of relationship in their childhoods, after which John set out on his lonely mission in the wilderness.

People eventually followed John to the desert, attracted by his message that we are called to good works and to turn away from sin. In humility John announced that his mission was limited, that he had come only to prepare the way for someone greater still, a savior, who would make crooked paths straight, a righteous king who would punish the wicked with a consuming and unquenchable fire.

Enter Jesus in renewed encounter with his cousin. Jesus here, the supplicant, asking John for repentance in the waters of baptism. As John witnesses the Holy Spirit descending upon Jesus, he must have felt confirmed in his own mission and consoled that redemption for the people of his world was close at hand.

While people followed John to the desert, Jesus in contrast, came to people where they were, encountering them in all kinds of ordinary ways in their villages and towns. Word of miracles must have reached the ears of John, but seeds of doubt too, for Jesus seemed a reluctant king and messiah, content to pose questions rather than provide answers, happy to tell stories- the meaning of which seemed to suggest that justice and freedom from oppression would not

come with thunder and lightning. If not from above, from where and from whose hands must this deliverance come?

And so John having been imprisoned, reaches out to Jesus in a final encounter: **“Are you the one who is to come or should we look to another?”**

Jesus responds using the words of the prophet Isaiah, words that John must have already held close to his heart: “look the eyes of the blind are opened, the lame can walk, and the dead are raised”.

Transformed in his martyrdom, John the teacher reaches out to us today amidst our strife and unrest. Like all good teachers he asks questions of us rather than supplying answers: **is Jesus the One for us or do we look to another?**

In responding we have the benefit of witnessing the completion of Jesus' mission on earth, we experience his death and resurrection, share in the gift of the Eucharist together and are joined with the Holy Spirit.

And soon we will experience His birth. Where are our hearts today as we patiently await? This tiny baby will soon cry out to us for our love, for our care and protection, for our tenderness, for our strength. In his utter dependence Jesus reaches out.

Just as we await Jesus, he waits for us. In his humble arrival, Jesus wordlessly invites us to enter into relationship with him, using our hands and our hearts.

God asks that we model this relationship with His son- in our love and in our care for one another. It is this that will transform us. This will transform the world.

A teacher once memorably asked this of me: who in your life depends upon you? She went on to say that creating or cultivating such relationships are a necessity for us because they deepen our humanity.

As examples, parenthood comes obviously to mind, but of course there are other routes too – deep friendship and ongoing relationship with someone who has been marginalized in life, ongoing care and presence for the sick, advocacy for a person in seeming scandal with the world, even, and possibly in our older age, caring for a beloved pet.

We transform the life of another in the process- and we make ordinary- the extraordinary miracles spoken of by Isaiah, John and Jesus- feeble hands are strengthened, those lowly bowed-down are raised, the poor receive good news.

In the process, we come to realize that in our relationship with Jesus and His Spirit we are co-creators of the just world that John and Old Testament prophets cried-out for. As for the punishment that was promised by the prophets, Jesus shows us that encounter and relationship are far more transformative than punishment could ever be.

And what of us? Our relationships transform us too- they soften our hearts, they strengthen our resolve, they test our patience, they stretch our capacity to love. They make us confront and heal our wounds.

In the outstretched hands of the coming baby Jesus, may we see a model for relationship with our God and with one another. Like our teacher, John- Jesus, we look to you.