

When the disciples John the Baptist sent to Jesus posed the question John wanted them to ask regarding Jesus and his ministry: “Are you the one to come, or should we look for another?” John was remembering his own ministry with the declaration we heard last Sunday: “Even now the axe lies at the root of the trees. God’s winnowing fan is in his hand. He will clear his threshing floor...the chaff he will burn in unquenchable fire” (Mt. 3:1-12). John has difficulty believing that Jesus is the one for whom he has prepared the way. Where is his metaphorical axe? Why is his preaching not one of hellfire and brimstone? John breathed fire, and he was expecting someone like him. Only more so. John is not unlike some Christians, including some Catholics, who resonate with an image of God as someone whose hand has to be held back, either by Jesus or Mary, from completely destroying the world in its sinfulness. John’s predecessor, if he had one, was the fifth century prophet Malachi, who proclaimed: “Who will endure the day of his coming? And who can stand when he appeareth? For he is like a refiner’s fire” (Mal. 3:2,3). John has been ready for the Coming One, but the One who comes does not meet his expectations.

Jesus’ answer to John’s question draws out the differences between the two. Jesus does not quote Malachi, but rather the late seventh century prophet known as Third Isaiah, such as Isaiah 61: “He (God) has sent me to bring glad tidings to the lowly” And other passages such as our first reading: “He comes to save you. Then will the eyes of the blind be opened, the ears of the deaf be cleared; then will the lame leap like a stag, then the tongue of the mute will sing” (Isa. 35:1-6,10). Instead of John’s axe, Jesus is reforesting the desert by healing Israelites who are in need. John breathes the fire of God’s retribution. He would answer fire with fire. But Jesus comes speaking of mercy and renewal. There is an unexpected change in the program. John figures in the program and to his credit sometimes we all need a “wake up call” to alert us to the potential or real consequences of our attitudes and the actions that flow from them in terms of the final judgment by God.

While we hear from John today, even more so we hear from Jesus whose coming among us in greater grace we prepare for this season. It is to this coming that the letter of James directs our attention.

James speaks of the process of growth using a farming metaphor, one all of us here in Iowa can readily relate to. While time-enhanced photography is able to compress the transformation from seed to fully mature and fruit bearing plant into a matter of five seconds, experience tells us growth is a process which evolves over time. In the process two forces are at work: the farmer and nature. The farmer tills the soil, plants the seed, strives to keep the soil weed free and applies necessary fertilizer. But it takes nature: sun, timely rains, and favorable winds and temperature to awaken, sustain, and work the transformation of growth from seed to fruit. All the farmer can do after his work is to have faith and live in hope that nature will do its part and that the end result will be an abundant harvest. James sees this as a metaphor for the life of grace and the working out of our salvation begun by Jesus in us through baptism and sustained and nourished through the other sacraments, especially the Holy Eucharist and Penance. Years ago it was not uncommon in northeast Iowa on a summer Sunday afternoon to see farmers slowly ambling down dusty country roads in their cars “looking at the fields” checking on the progress of the crop, much to the chagrin of anyone who got caught driving behind them!

Jesus invites us today to take a “drive” with him to “look at the fields” and, rejoice in the progress of the crop of the Kingdom still coming in our life. If we have the eyes of faith to see, we already have signs of the harvest and the Kingdom to come: the black bag collection every third weekend of the month that provides for the needs of so many in our community; every referral to Birthright that results in one less abortion; every time we reconcile with someone over an injury; every smile given, words of encouragement spoken—all of these open eyes, unstop ears, cause the desert to bloom, all are Advents of Jesus and the Kingdom now, today. “Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say rejoice!”