

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Lena, IL – 11 December 2022**  
**Third Sunday of Advent - Year A**

**1st Reading: *Isaiah 35:1-10***

**Psalm: *146:5-10***

**2nd Reading: *James 5:7-10***

**Gospel: *Matthew 11:2-11***

**Sermon - Vicar Thomas J. Mosbø**

In the name of the Father, ✚ and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Once upon a time there was a fair kingdom where King Arthur reigned with the knights of the round table in Camelot. All was well throughout Britain. But how was it that Arthur became king? Well, if you are familiar with the myths of King Arthur you will know that there was a mysterious figure behind the throne, the magician Merlin, who set the sword in the stone that only Arthur was able to draw, proving that he was the true-born king of all Britain. And some scholars believe that this Merlin was actually the Christian bishop Dubricius.

And once upon a time in the fantasy kingdom of Gondor, King Aragorn reigned at Minas Tirith, after the destruction of the evil "One Ring to rule them all". And if you are familiar with the tale of *The Lord of the Rings*, my favourite book of all time, written by the very dedicated Christian author J.R.R. Tolkien, who wrote in one of his letters that *The Lord of the Rings* was fundamentally a religious and Christian work, you will know that there was a mysterious figure who helped to inspire the actions that put Aragorn on the throne, and who then crowned him, the Wizard Gandalf, who in Tolkien's mythology was actually an angel in disguise. [And by the way, if any of you may have wondered whether we liked *The Lord of the Rings*, you could always ask our daughter, Arwen.]

And once upon a time in the land of Israel, there was a fair kingdom where King David, the son of Jesse, reigned in Jerusalem, and where he prepared for the building of the Temple where the true God of the universe would dwell among his people. But how was it that David became king? Well, if you are familiar with the story of King David from the Old Testament you will know that there was a mysterious figure behind the throne, the prophet Samuel, who had first anointed Saul king of Israel, but when Saul had proved himself unfaithful to God, Samuel had then anointed David as the true king. Samuel was the first of the prophets, and had himself been raised by Eli the priest in the Tabernacle of God.

And now, for all time, there is the Kingdom of God, where the Messiah, the king of heaven and earth, Jesus Christ of Nazareth, reigns eternally. But how was it that Jesus became king? Well, as we know from passages in the Gospels, such as the excerpt from Matthew we just read this morning, there was a mysterious figure in the background, John the Baptist, who anointed Jesus as the Messiah when he baptised him in the Jordan River.

Like Samuel before him, John the Baptist's birth was itself miraculous. Like Samuel's mother Hannah, John's mother Elizabeth was barren, unable to have children. But the angel Gabriel had appeared to John's father, Zechariah, and promised that Elizabeth would have a son and that they were to name him John. And like Samuel, John was to be dedicated solely to God. Along with Samson, Samuel and John were the only life-long Nazarites in the Bible. A few weeks ago in our Bible study of the book of Numbers we read about the three vows of a Nazarite: They must not drink wine or even eat grapes or raisins, they must not touch a dead body, and they must never cut their hair. If you remember the tragic story of Samson, he was given miraculous strength by God, but he broke all of his Nazarite vows - he drank wine, he killed many Philistines, and finally he was tricked by Delilah and his hair was cut off - at which point he lost his miraculous strength. In the end, God gave him grace to perform one more deed of strength, but it came only at his own death.

Samuel and John the Baptist, however, kept their vows throughout their lives. We know from Jesus' own words that John never drank wine. Instead, as we heard in last week's Gospel, his diet was locusts and wild honey - and interestingly Samson also enjoyed honey. And like Samuel, John was raised by a priest, his own father Zechariah. But then he chose to follow his calling as a prophet, proclaiming in the desert that the Messiah was at hand. And from his description in the New Testament, and from artist's depictions down through the ages, we may imagine him as quite a scary figure, dressed in rough clothes, eating locusts, and never cutting his hair throughout his entire life - something of a wild man, shouting out that God's "winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." If you have never seen it, I highly recommend Franco Zeffirelli's 6-hour film *Jesus of Nazareth*, in which Michael York plays a very convincing John the Baptist.

And yet, in spite of his proclamations that Jesus is the Messiah, in today's Gospel, John seems to have his doubts about Jesus. He is languishing in prison, where he will soon die at the hand of King Herod, and so we read that "When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Had his own situation caused John to doubt?

I don't think so. I don't think that it was John himself who had these doubts. Just after he had baptised Jesus, the Gospel of John tells us that John the Baptist had told two of his disciples, "Behold the Lamb of God", and encouraged them to follow Jesus instead of himself. So I think that John is here once again doing exactly the same thing. Instead of just telling his disciples, his students, his followers, that Jesus is indeed the Messiah, he sends them to Jesus to see for themselves.

And what did they find? They found that in Jesus "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." In other words, all of the promises the prophet Isaiah had written about had come true. The Messiah is here, and he is Jesus. John's work of preparing the way for the Messiah had also now been fulfilled, as Jesus tells us:

John "is the one about whom it is written,  
'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way before you.'

<sup>11</sup>Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist."

Like Merlin, perhaps the bishop Dubricius, like the mythical Gandalf, and like Samuel, John had indeed put the true king on the throne. It is a wondrous story, made all the more wondrous by being true - as Tolkien wrote, the story of Jesus is the one *true* myth, that makes all the others worth reading. We all enjoy hearing stories, but this is the most wonderful of them all. And John's wild character is one of the things that makes it the most fun.

And yet Jesus then goes on to say that "the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John." We, too, are characters in the story. When we accept the grace given to us by Jesus the Messiah, the Lamb of God, who laid down his life to take away the sins of the world, when we live in love as he asks us, when we are "patient until the coming of the Lord, strengthening our hearts, being examples of suffering and patience in the name of the Lord" as James encourages us in his letter this morning, then we, too, even if we are the "least in the kingdom of God", are part of this wondrous story, which is, as C.S. Lewis, Tolkien's best friend, tells us "the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before."

Amen!

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