

# The Sunday Gospel

## Third Sunday of Advent (*Gaudete Sunday*)

(Lectionary Year A) Matthew 11:2-11

### **About today:**

*In the third Sunday of Advent, the Scriptures draw our eyes to signs of God's nearness; signs that heal, restore, and renew hope. Isaiah's vision of the desert coming into flower and the weak made strong becomes the backdrop for the Lord Jesus' response to Saint John the Baptist: look at what is happening, and you will see who God is and what he is doing. The blind are able to see, the lame walk, and good news reaches the poor. This is fulfilment of the prophecy not in spectacle, but through compassion made real.*

*Together, these two readings invite us to recognise Christ's quiet but transforming work in the world and in ourselves, and to rediscover joy (this is *Gaudete Sunday* after all) rooted not in present circumstances but in our encounter with Jesus the healer and restorer.*

## Gospel Reading

*Read the whole passage slowly a few times, keeping one or two minutes of silence between each time.*

<sup>11:2</sup> When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples

<sup>3</sup> and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”

<sup>4</sup> Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see:

<sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>6</sup> And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

<sup>7</sup> As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind?

<sup>8</sup> What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces.

<sup>9</sup> What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.

<sup>10</sup> 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.’

<sup>11</sup> 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.

## **Broader Picture:**

Last week we saw how Matthew 3 marks the shift from Jesus' infancy to his public mission. Chapter 11 marks another significant transition. Up until now Jesus' identity has been revealed through

- the birth narrative,
- his baptism and temptation
- the Sermon on the Mount
- miracles demonstrating authority
- he calling and sending of the disciples

But in chapter 11, the focus turns to how people respond to Jesus. The question at this point in the gospel is not only "Who is Jesus?", but "Do you recognise Him as the Christ and the Son of God?"

In this context St John the Baptist, who announced the coming of the Messiah, now appears again, but from prison. His question launches a new section exploring misunderstandings about Jesus, reactions to His ministry, and the contrast between expectation and fulfilment of Israel's hopes.

## **Interpretation Notes:**

**vv.2-3:** "...*John heard in prison...*" These two verses pull us into a moment of profound tension: the greatest prophet of Israel wrestling with the mystery of Jesus. In the gospels of John and Luke we are given a clearer picture of the Baptist's understanding of Jesus. In Luke he leaps in the womb of Elizabeth rejoicing at the presence of Mary carrying the Lord. In John, John the Baptist clearly points Jesus out as "the Lamb of God" (John 1:29).

However, Matthew paints the very human picture of someone trying to figure out a person whose behaviour does not meet their expectations. Why is this? At that time, people expected the Messiah to overthrow oppressive political structures immediately. John himself preached with considerable urgency about the judgment that the Messiah would bring:

*“His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will clear His threshing floor...”* (Matthew 3:12). Observing Jesus focusing on teaching, healing, and mercy, rather than direct political revolution, could have sparked confusion. John, confined to prison and suffering, may have wondered why the Messiah’s judgment had not yet manifested.

Saint Augustine of Hippo emphasises the integrity of John’s testimony: *“he knew that Jesus was the Christ.”* But he also allows that the question arises because the mode of Christ’s mission was not entirely what John had imagined, no axe at the root, no winnowing fire yet.

This is an important point that can bring us comfort in times of doubt and difficulties. The dissonance between our expectations and their fulfilment can cause faithful people to ask honest questions.

**v. 3:** *“...the one who is to come...”* These words are loaded with religious significance. In Jewish expectation, *“the one who is coming”* referred not simply to a figure arriving, but to God’s decisive intervention in history; a moment of restoration, judgment, and new creation. Jesus is God’s decisive action. In John’s gospel we find that Martha’s confession of faith uses similar words, *“Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.”* (John 11:27)

**vv.4-5:** *“...tell John what you hear...”* Jesus responds not with an argument but with signs. This is striking. Jesus could have said: *“Yes. I am the Christ.”* But instead He says: *“Look at what is happening.”*

John’s disciples are asked to see in the miracles worked by Jesus a fulfilment of Isaiah’s prophecies (one of which we read today are our first reading). The mercy displayed in these signs is the true hallmark of the Messiah.

**v.6:** “...*blessed is anyone who takes no offense...*” This short verse provides the interpretative key for the whole passage. The verb *skandalizo* in Scripture does not mean “offended” in the modern sense. It means to stumble, trip up, fall away and to lose faith because of something unexpected. So, Jesus is saying: “Blessed is the one who does not stumble because I am not the Messiah they expected.”

Though addressed to John, via his disciples, this has profound meaning for us as well. We too can become despondent or fall away from the practice of religion when it does not meet our expectations, or when the message of Jesus does not match out preconceived ideas about Him. Jesus reminds us that, if we do not let these dissonances get to us and keep faith in him, then we are blessed.

**vv.7-9:** “...*What did you go out ... to look at?*” Jesus speaks to the crowd once John’s disciples’ have left. These are rich and affectionate verses are, in many ways, Jesus’ public commendation of John.

The rhetorical questions Jesus poses paint a picture in complete contrast with John’s life and mission. Jesus mentioned a “*reed shaken by the wind*”, while John was unbending, immovable, firm as a rock in his mission.

Jesus mentioned “*soft robes*” and people who live in palaces. This image would have made the crowd smile because they knew John wore a coarse tunic made of camel hair and lived in the wilderness foraging for his food. Therefore something else must have attracted them to him – the fact that John was the greatest of all prophets.

**v.10:** “...*I am sending my messenger ahead of you...*” Jesus quotes Malachi 3:1 to identify John as the forerunner to God’s coming reign. This is a unique role, never to be repeated in history. John’s ministry is the hinge between the prophets and the fulfilment.

But here we find also a subtle and important Christological claim. In Malachi, the “messenger” prepares the way before the LORD (YHWH, the sacred name of God, substituted with Adonai or LORD). In Matthew, Jesus applies the verse to himself, implying that He himself is the God coming into the world.

**v. 11:** “...among those born of women...” This is a Semitic idiom for all humanity. Jesus is making a sweeping statement: in the entire order of human history, John stands at the summit. Why? Because he is the final prophet, the direct herald of the Messiah, and the living bridge between the old and the new. St Augustine notes that John is “the voice” giving way to “the Word.” His greatness is that he knows he is not the Light but bears witness to it.

**v. 11:** “...the least in the kingdom ... is greater than he...” John is the greatest human being of the old order. But the kingdom introduces a new order altogether. The “*kingdom of heaven*” here refers to the new life made possible through Christ – life after the Paschal mystery, participation in divine sonship, the life of the Spirit.

Saint John Chrysostom notes that the “*least*” means those who share in the mysteries of Christ and of the New Covenant – baptism, Eucharist, the indwelling Spirit. Their greatness is not moral superiority but sacramental participation in what John could only announce.

These words are not meant to belittle John’s position, but they are an affirmation of what Christ has come to make possible: union with God and participation in His eternal, divine life.

## Questions for this week:

- *“Are you the one who is to come?”*  
Where in my life do I find myself asking Jesus the same question that John asked – perhaps with uncertainty, impatience, or longing?
- *“Go and tell John what you hear and see...”*  
What is the Lord doing (or has done) in my life and around me in terms of healing and restoration? Can I see the Kingdom quietly at work?
- *“Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”*  
Do I ever feel a dissonance between my expectations and their fulfilment when it comes to faith? Am I able to voice them in prayer?
- *“The least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”*  
Do I spend time in prayer and praise recognising the great gifts Jesus gives us by making us sharers in his divine nature?  
Do I acknowledge union with Him in the Eucharist as a pledge of eternal union with Him in heaven?

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Notes by Father Diego Galanzino for *The Sunday Gospel* – A discipleship group of the Parish of All Saints' Houghton Regis, December 2025. [allsaintshr.co.uk/learning](http://allsaintshr.co.uk/learning)