

Do we not live in interesting times? In far away places people are rioting, shooting or blowing each other up; one nation's president is in denial about the dire state of his people's health and economy, another is busy spending his last days trying to piece together a "legacy" for his deeply unpopular administration. The words "Iraq" and "Afghanistan" are slowly sinking into that general background noise which is the sense of the wrongness which is everywhere; we don't really notice them so much these days as they slip deeper into the newspapers or TV news bulletins. Closer to home we're told we need a \$10 billion dollar spending spree, dozens of childcare centres are closing, a \$40 billion transport "solution" is promised, unemployment rises as the credit squeeze bites, we hear the first serious talk of deficit budgets in years, and a lost young soul has become a lost life at the hands of constabulary who are probably just as lost in the whole mess.

Yet perhaps these things are *not* all that "interesting", for they continue day after day, blunting our ability to absorb or respond. They have become like the air we breath – something we notice when we're a bit short of it, or when it blows a little harder, but generally not really remarkable because it is everywhere. Against this background of things happening "out there", of course, we do feel a little more sharply those things which impinge upon us directly – health, relationships, finances, and so on. These are perhaps the things which interest us most, even if we are no more able to deal with even them to our own satisfaction.

We are not unique with our anxieties and concerns. Human beings have always experienced the world in this way. In our gospel reading this morning we heard the questions asked of John the Baptist: Are you the prophet, the Messiah, Elijah? The precise meaning of these terms need not concern us, for the thing to note is simply that these questions are asked because there is a longing for the promises associated with the titles, a longing which arises from the sense that things aren't right, and are

beyond our capacity to fix, so that *God* must act to set them right. There is a deep desire here for "*the One*" who will bring things to their proper order, and the priests and the Pharisees ask whether *this* one – John himself – is who they are waiting for.

We are no different today. In the midst of all the change and decay around us we are given to ask, "Are you the one?" This is the question we put to our politicians, our doctors and therapists, our lovers, our teachers, our ministers. And the answer we receive will usually be, even if qualified this way or that, "Yes". Yes, I am the man, the woman, for the times. Yes, I see clearly where we are, and where we must go. Yes, I will bring you through this. Are you the one? Yes... The "Yes" is probably only ever as blatant as this in the field of politics or in the job interview, where self-promotion is rather more to the fore, but the same logic applies in many places: the new CEO or Headmaster, the new talent, the star recruit. We listen to hear that, finally, we have found "the One" who will make the difference we need.

But the extraordinary thing in our gospel reading today is that, in response to the question "Are you the one?", John gives the most unexpected of answers: "No". No, I am not Elijah. I am not the prophet. I am not the Messiah. I am but a voice crying out in the wilderness, "Prepare". There is no false modesty, no offering of a partial solution to the promises, no "humble" claiming of at least a few good ideas as to how we might improve our lot. We might say, to his greater glory, that John "hasn't got a clue". He knows only that "I am unworthy even to untie the sandals of 'the One', who is coming after me." In the verses which follow our reading today John professes that even the identity of the "the One" is unknown to him (1.33). He is able to do nothing but announce and, when "the One" finally appears, point. "Are you the One", he is asked, and he makes the most uncharacteristic of human responses to such questions: "No, I am not".

It is very hard not to *know*, not to have a

solution and so not to want to *be* the solution to whatever ails us or others. That is, *humility* comes very hard to us – the willingness to look or point beyond ourselves to another who knows or is what we truly need. But more than this humility is that which would *hear* John's preaching – that the one we most desire is yet "one whom [we] do not know". It's easy for Christians to presume here that we know better than those priests and Pharisees who first heard John. We already know that Jesus is the one John points to. But we too must hear that this Jesus is yet one "whom we do not know". If we *did* truly know him, the change and decay around us would shake us less, for we would live out of the confidence that in the hands of the God who raises the dead even death itself is no final, indefeasible enemy. The Baptist invites us not to grasp after this or that hope which is simply a wishing that things be different, but to watch and wait for what we do not yet know, but which is yet precisely what we need.

The promised answer to our desires comes to us in the person of Jesus, a child in a manger who becomes a man upon a cross, spanning all that we live in our lives, and at the same time transcending *the way* in which we live. This is what we long for – not simply life but life in all its fullness. This is what we are offered in the crucified and risen Jesus, a freedom from fear, and also a freedom from resignation, cynicism and withdrawal.

The life of Jesus is a life which rejoices in the marvels of our existence, and mourns its pains, all because this is a life which is confident that there is more than we can see, more than we yet know, about ourselves and what God *will* do with us.

This life God offers us not in a couple of weeks at Christmas time, but here and now. It begins with the simple suggestion that there is such a life possible – the life which Jesus himself lived – and our looking to see God give shape to that life in our very midst, in ones whom we do not yet know, in ones we might least expect it. The humility of John invites humility in ourselves, a waiting on the surprising gift of God to meet us in our hour of need.

Let us pray, then, for that humility, that

when God comes with his gift of peace we might finally recognise him, rejoice in the life he brings, and give him all right praise. Amen.