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Introduction

The Latin paradoxum means something which, in some way or other, completely conflicts with expectation. In the Gospel readings for this Advent, we have been looking at some of the hidden paradoxes which lie beneath the surface of Matthew's texts about preparation for, and response to, the coming of the Kingdom of God; and thinking about how these might in turn help us to reflect on different aspects of conflict and how our own attitudes and beliefs influence how we deal with this. Today's reading throws up two further instances of confounded expectation which can add another dimension to our understanding in these areas.

Anchor Question

Try and remember a situation where the answer you received to a question, or the way a situation unfolded, was completely different to what you had expected. How did you feel? What effect did it have on how you responded or on your subsequent understandings – did you change as a result?

or: Imagine you are John the Baptist in prison and rumours reach you about the doings of Jesus. Are they what you expected? How does it make you feel that Jesus has not assumed the role of Messiah in the way in which you had expected? What questions does it raise for you?

Text

Matthew 11:2–11

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?" Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: 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. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me." 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? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 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.' 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.

At first sight we might wonder why Jesus does not send back a simple 'yes I am' in response to John's question. After all John is languishing in prison, facing the prospect of death and apparently seeking reassurance that he has not been mistaken in his announcement of the impending appearance of the Messiah. Surely in such circumstances giving an immediate and unambiguous answer would be the kindest thing to do? It is possible of course that Jesus avoids giving an answer which, if later overheard by John's guards, might lead to his own arrest, but in view of his outspokenness elsewhere, this seems unlikely. A more interesting and compelling possibility is that he sends back an answer which will help John, even in prison, to reflect on and continue to grow in his own understanding of God's purposes.

This particular scene comes at an important point in Matthew's Gospel narrative: following the birth narratives, and the baptism and temptation of Jesus, chapters 5 to 9 see Matthew 'setting out Jesus' stall' in two distinct ways. Chapters 5 to 7 show him as 'the Messiah of word' as, through the famous Sermon on the Mount (the first of his' 5 great discourses in Matthew), he unfolds the blueprint of the Kingdom. Then the intense and action-packed narrative of chapters 8 and 9 show him putting this manifesto into action as he calls disciples, heals the sick, raises the dead, casts out demons, subdues the storm etc. – in effect he is now the 'Messiah of deed', instantiating 'the good news of the Kingdom' in tangible and substantial ways.

Jesus' answer to John's disciples thus allows him to underline all that has been said and done since his return from the wilderness; and all that will be continued by his disciples whom, in Chapter 10 (and through the second discourse) he has sent out to continue the work of the Kingdom. But it also allows him to draw an important contrast for the imprisoned Baptist and his disciples to reflect on. Both John (in Mt 3:2) and Jesus (in Mt 4:17) begin their public ministries with a call to "repent, for the Kingdom of heaven has come near" but what follows afterwards is very different: for John the arrival of the Messianic age signified the beginning of judgement, and the imagery in his preaching (Mt 3:7-12) – the wrath to come, baptism with fire, the winnowing fork, burning chaff, the axe at the root, the lopped trees etc. is primarily concerned with destruction. In contrast, Jesus' announcement of the arrival of the Kingdom is followed by a veritable cornucopia of healing (Mt 4: 23-25), the Beatitudes and other inclusive, encouraging and expansive words of the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7), and then another wave or compassionate response and restoration in various forms (Mt 8-9).

Jesus thus draws a very different picture of what has in fact followed on from the arrival of the Kingdom to that which John's preaching had anticipated. In responding as he does, Jesus subtly invites John to have confidence in the correctness of his proclamation of the arrival of the Messianic Age whilst simultaneously pointing him towards another, richer understanding of what that entails.

The second confounded expectation comes in the comments which Jesus makes to his wider audience following this response to John's disciples. After inviting them to reflect on why it was they had gone out to the desert to listen to John he offers the startling observation that 'the least in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than he'. This is surely not what his hearers would have been expecting. After all John was equated with Elijah – the foremost of the prophets in a substantial tradition – and had been highly regarded and influential. Even Jesus himself accords him the preeminent place amongst those 'born of woman'. So once again Jesus confronts his hearers with a profound paradox about the Kingdom – it is not structured around any hierarchy for which their previous religious and social expectations and understandings have prepared them. In other places Jesus will expand on this theme describing how people must become like children to enter (Mt 18:3-4), how the small and the least are of highest honour there (Mt 19:4), how tax collectors and prostitutes will enter ahead of the religiously educated and observant (Mt 21:31) etc. but here there is just a simple confounding statement; John the Baptist, for all his greatness and pre-eminence amongst mortals, is amongst the smallest and the least in the Kingdom.

We are not told why – perhaps it was because John, despite all, had not yet understood what the true role of the Messiah was – and in the end it doesn't really matter; what is important is that Jesus once again challenges us to realise that sometimes we need to step outside of our cherished ideas – no matter how certain

they are – and look at a situation with a different eye. In so doing, we open up new dimensions of understanding and new possibilities for response and action.

This is an insight which extends beyond its application in this particular time and place, becoming as well a useful tool which we carry forward to help us in dealing with the areas of difficulty and conflict which we face. Thus once again the Gospel, read through the lens of a spirituality of conflict, provides us with a corresponding lens through which to read our present world.

Response

Reflect on a scenario involving other people – conflict or non–conflict, small or large — in which you are currently involved. Can you identify any ideas or understandings that you took with you into that situation which have either hindered your attempts to resolve it or impaired your ability to enjoy or benefit from it? Is there another way to view things – and does that lead you to any ideas about how to alter your way of approaching this particular interaction?

Prayer

A simple responsive prayer

Leader: God whose Kingdom is unexpected and confounding

All: Open our minds to understand and believe

Leader: Jesus whose words are unexpected and baffling

All: Open our hearts to accept and expand

Leader: Holy Spirit, whose ways are unexpected and mysterious

All: Open our lives to be challenged and changed

Leader: Dynamic Trinity
whose Kingdom is Justice
whose words are life
whose ways are liberating

**All: In opening ourselves to you
may we enter more fully
into the joy of your Kingdom.
Amen.**