

Text: Matthew 11:2-10

Theme: The struggle of faith.

5 minute Sermon delivered by Reverend Dele Agbelusi in 2011 at 8am Holy Communion Service.

There are times in the lives of all of us when things seem to go exceptionally well. Plans work out, dreams take substance and shape, and projects fall into place. On such occasions, quite naturally, we rejoice, for it is clear to us that life is full and that there are not only satisfactions but also accomplishments which enable us to feel worthwhile.

By the same token, there are times in the lives of all of us when everything seems to go wrong. We start off on some task with the goal clearly in sight, only to encounter obstacles which are insurmountable. We are moving along life's way when our lives are crossed by the shadow of disaster, either personally or in the experience of those we love. Sometimes these rough places occur because of negligence or evil-doing on our part; at other times they occur because of circumstances over which we have little, if any, control. In any event, all of us know these times quite well as the sun goes behind the cloud and we walk through the shadow of despair. Indeed, it is likely that for most of us these times become the most crucial of all times, and it is certain that they happen to all of us at one time or other.

This was certainly true for John the Baptizer. He knew and stated clearly as he contemplated his relationship to Jesus, "He must increase, and I must decrease" (John 3:30). And yet, now in the prison, the perspective was becoming distorted, and his faith began to falter. "Are you really the one who should come, or shall we look for another?" (Matt. 11:3).

The poignancy of the text is made even clearer when one considers the content of chapters 8 and 9 of Matthew's Gospel. There is pictured for us a series of vignettes, each of them marked by the presence of deliverance. There is a leper to whom Jesus stretched out his hand to touch, and he was made clean. There is the servant of the centurion, who was paralyzed, and Jesus speaks the word and his paralysis leaves him. Jesus enters the house of Simon Peter and finds his mother-in-law sick with a fever. He touches her, and the fever leaves. That evening many persons possessed with demons are brought to him, and he casts out the demons and heals all who are sick. He and the disciples enter a boat, and a great storm arises at sea. Jesus speaks and the storm is calmed. They come into the country of the Gadarenes, where two demoniacs meet him, and he brings health and serenity to them. There is a paralytic who is brought by his friends and let down through the roof. Jesus enables him to walk. There is the ruler who beseeches him for his daughter who has just died, and Jesus brings her back to life. There is a woman who has suffered from a haemorrhage for twelve years, and she is delivered when she touches only the fringe of his garment. There are two blind men who are enabled to see, and there is a dumb demoniac to whom Jesus gives the ability to speak. And in the tenth chapter, Jesus sends out the twelve with authority and power to heal the sick, to cast out demons, to set at liberty those who are bound.

John knows this. He knows it all. The text says, "John heard in prison about the deeds of Christ," (Matthew 11:2) and it is just here that he sends his disciples to raise the agonizing question, "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?" Jesus' response is well-known. He instructs the disciples to note what he is doing: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up and the poor have good news preached to them" (Matthew 11:4-5).

These evidences of deliverance are everywhere, but the realistic fact is that they are not universal. They happen to some, but not to all. Then it is that Jesus speaks what has been called the most neglected of all the Beatitudes, **“And blessed is he who takes no offence at me” (Matt. 11:6). John dies in the prison. ‘Blessed is he that takes no offence’.**

It is a word for that time, and it is a word for our time. For faith is comparatively easy when things go well; faith becomes difficult when things turn against us and there seems to be no release. It is then that we are blessed if we take no offence. Most of the time in our lives when trouble comes we are able to work our way through it. Illness strikes us, and we are well. Our loved ones go to the hospital, the things that are done are appropriate, and they return. And yet, for all of us, the time comes when these kinds of deliverances will not occur, at least not on their own terms. The grip of pain will not be broken, the tragedy will not be set aside; the death will not be thwarted. How is it possible to have faith when the release does not come?

The basic assurance is that all things are working together for good, as Paul reminds us in Romans 8:28, and that nothing can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (v. 38). But this is no guarantee of deliverance from all of the difficulties which beset us. Indeed, we are reminded in John 16 that “in the world we will have tribulation; but we can be of good cheer, for he has overcome the world” (John 16:33). **The true meaning of faith, then, is the capacity to believe even when no seagull comes, to know that beyond the vicissitudes and tribulations of life there is life transcendent; there is no more suffering, nor sorrow, nor crying.**

Thus, for all of us from time-to-time in the midst of our difficulty there will be a seagull. Illness will pass, the trouble will resolve itself, the deliverance will come. At the same time, there will be times for all of us when, ‘it doesn't get any better’. Then it is that we are blessed when we take no offence. Then it is we understand the true struggle of faith, the faith that is able to sustain us and to enable us to transcend the vicissitudes of life, knowing for certain that “he that hath begun a good work in us will continue it till the day of Jesus Christ,” (Philippians 1:6) and that “the Lord God the Omnipotent reigneth. Hallelujah!” (Revelations 19.6). Amen.