

Engagement, not spectators

If crowds of people come to our Christmas events, we might well congratulate ourselves on our success. But Jesus isn't taken in by the multitudes who surround him at this point in his ministry. He knows that the motivations for joining a crowd are varied; that there will be many uncommitted spectators; and that crowds can prove fickle, speedily evaporating or turning nasty. Yesterday the crowds went out to the wilderness to see John; today they've come to see and hear Jesus; tomorrow they may have moved on to the next attraction – as sure as Christmas follows Hallowe'en, and gives way to Valentine's and Mother's Days.

Not that coming to see and hear is a bad thing. Jesus recognises John as a prophet: prophets seek to hear the word and see the hand of the Lord. But prophets are seers, rather than spectators: they derive meaning from what they have seen and heard. John is to do the same: Jesus refers him to what his disciples have heard and seen in their time with Jesus.

According to Matthew, since completing his Sermon on the Mount Jesus has been preaching the good news of the kingdom; healing many (including a man with leprosy, a paralytic and two blind men); and has restored a synagogue leader's daughter to life. Jesus' message to John harks back to Isaiah's prophecies about the coming of the Lord: *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*. John is to draw his own conclusion from his knowledge of the scriptures and the evidence of his disciples' ears and eyes. And that response will determine whether Jesus' postscript is received as a blessing or a rebuke: *Blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me [he whosoever shall not be offended in me]*. Those who were scandalised (that's the English equivalent) by Jesus included the Pharisees, who'd already accused him of casting out demons by Beelzebub, prince of demons. The literal meaning of the Greek *skandalon* is stumbling-block – another reference to the prophecy of Isaiah, where the Lord declares himself to be a stumbling-block to his wayward people. The New Testament picks this up: our response to Jesus is critical; is he our cornerstone or a stone over which we stumble?

If we hadn't realised already, we and the crowds are intended to overhear Jesus' words to John's disciples: we need to draw our own conclusions from what we have heard and seen.

Jesus continues: the crowds who saw John in the wilderness should see him as the messenger prophesied by Malachi, preparing the way for the Lord. The crowds need to look beyond John to where he was pointing. If they are looking for greatness, as spectators often do, Jesus directs them to the *kingdom of heaven*, where *the least is greater than he*. But there are no spectators in that kingdom, only participants, by God's gracious invitation: Jesus' parables imply you either grasp it, or you don't; you either have a place, or you don't. He will go on to criticise those of his generation who failed to respond either to John or to him, dismissing the austere John as possessed and Jesus as a glutton and a drunkard, associating with all the wrong sorts of people. Jesus is looking for engagement, not spectators.

We know our answer to the Baptist's question: we are not to wait for another. Jesus is God's final word. But we do wait, with those to whom James writes, for the full dawning of his kingdom. Whether we experience that as blessing or rebuke will depend on our response in the meantime.