

Somebody once observed to the eminent philosopher Wittgenstein how stupid medieval Europeans living before the time of Copernicus must have been that they could have looked at the sky and thought that the sun was circling the earth. Surely a modicum of astronomical good sense would have told them that the reverse was true. Wittgenstein is said to have replied: 'I agree. But I wonder what it would have looked like if the sun had been circling the earth'. The point (being) that it would have looked exactly the same.

(p. 11. *The Day the Universe Changed*: James Burke)

I have some sympathy for John the Baptist here: in prison, facing death and wondering if things had really changed at all. The landscape looked much the same, a corrupt governing class, the poor still poor, Israel still subject to a foreign power – and echoes of this still today. Well, of course, Christ has come but, apart from a multitude of spires and a lot of ecclesiastical dressing up, has the landscape really changed? And I've some sympathy with the Jews still waiting for their Messiah. What difference has Jesus really made? And we could as well say,

Are you the one who is to come, or have we got to wait for someone else?

And the answer is, I suspect, equivocal:

*Go back and tell John what you hear and see; the blind see again,
and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, and the dead
are raised to life and the Good News is proclaimed to the poor.*

What Good News? Of course, where Jesus was, some of this happened in a very real physical sense, but, statistically, the landscape looked much the same and still does today, at least in terms of religious agency. It's after all the NHS that's really made a difference. Or are we merely seeing the sun circling the earth and drawing wrong conclusions? Christ has come, but the change that has to take place, the Copernican revolution, is within us; the landscape looks the same but is, in fact, entirely different and, just occasionally, we get a kiss from heaven to tell us so: a deep sense that something else is going on. It's like seeing the land locked in winter and we still pray, still hope for change, or, in the words of this morning's hymn at Lauds

*The stone is cold, its fire is locked within;
The streams are held fast until the thaw begin,
The wint'ring earth is stilled, its music dumb
Till fire and water to their harvest come*

*Sow hope beyond the hope our senses bring,
Unseal our ears to hear your water sing;
Unseal our inward eye to know your light,
Though still the darkness presses on our sight.*

This is the call for patience in the letter of James, and the relevance of Isaiah, still, for Jew and Gentile alike. And the stark warning in today's gospel passage which is better translated as *Blessed is the one not scandalised by me*: who does not find me a stumbling block to belief, to hope. After all, what do we hope to find in a desert? Our human reasoning, whether inductive or deductive, isn't much help here. What we need is not 'a modicum of astronomical good sense' but a modicum of grace, for the Lord to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. And, in this sense, our hope is always for Christ's coming – yesterday, and today, and tomorrow. This is us circling Christ rather than Christ circling us. Though it may look exactly the same.

Br John Mayhead
Monastery of Christ Our Saviour