John the Baptist's question in our reading this evening, *Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?* is a significant contrast to John's statement in Chapter 3 when asked if he, John, was the Messiah: *John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water, but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the strap of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."* As you can hear a very significant contrast especially because when John baptised Jesus, John heard the voice from heaven, *You are my son the Beloved; with you I am well pleased*. What are the causes of the descent from great assurance to serious doubt?

I think there are two related sets of causes for John's apparent doubt. Firstly, John was imprisoned by Herod. We don't know for how long before his messengers came to Jesus with the question. But John was neither the first nor the last prisoner to become dejected, doubtful, and disoriented especially given the likely conditions in Herod's prison

The second reason that John might have had doubt about whether Jesus was the Messiah is even more likely. Jesus did not fulfill the human expectations of a Messiah. Yes, *the blind receive their sight; the lame walk; those with a skin disease*

***are cleansed; the deaf hear; the dead are raised; the poor have good news brought to them*.** **But the prophecy in Isaiah 61 about the coming of the Messiah is: *The spirit of the Lord God is upon me because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners*.... John is still in prison and understandably losing heart and all the Holy Land is oppressed. In Jeremiah 30, Israel is promised deliverance from foreign oppressors, but Rome still has cruel and unjust rule over Judah. Tyrants like Herod Antipas who have complete control in client kingdoms are entirely beholden to Rome. How can such things continue if Jesus was the Messiah?**

I discussed at some length two Sundays ago how the promises of the Messiah were against the vested interests not only of Herod Antipas, but also against the interests of the Priests in the Temple and of the Elders of the People who had quite a comfortable existence as long as they could keep the people under their thumbs. Throughout history, religious organizations have shown a talent for accommodating themselves to secular authorities provided the lives of religious authorities were not discommoded and their autonomy preserved. The Sadducees and the Pharisees were little different in their accommodation to Rome than both the

Roman and Protestant hierarchies in Germany and Italy to the Fascists and the Nazis in the 30's and 40's of the last century. And need we speak about the American religious right and its toadying to Donald Trump in our own time.

What does all this mean to us. Well the problem is rooted in Genesis. *Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image according to our likeness…."* Voltaire once wrote: *Si Dieu nous a fait à son image, nous le lui avons bien rendu*,"*If God has made us in his image, we have returned him the favour.* In other words, humans constantly see and think of God in human terms. If even John the Baptist whom Jesus describes as …*among those born of women, no one is greater than John* – if even John imposes on the Messiah a human vision of what is liberation, how much more likely are we to make the same mistakes.

It is interesting to think about the Hebrew Scripture. *The theme of God's bloody vengeance occurs in the Old Testament even more frequently than the problem of human violence. Approximately one thousand passages speak of Yahweh's blazing anger, of his punishments by death and destruction, and how like a consuming fire he passes judgment, takes revenge and threatens annihilation.* * Is it perhaps possible that all those passages of anger and vengeance are a human reflection of what it is to be all

powerful – a reflection born in human experience of the behaviour of earthy overlords falsely presumed to be characteristic of the Lord of all. Jesus was clearly not the Messiah expected. But he was the Messiah we need.

Through out human history every revolution has seen a counter-revolution unlocking more misery. What would someone who braved the Tsarist police to forge equality in Russia in 1917, think of Russia today? Was the struggle worth it? How well has *Liberté, Egalité, et Fraternité* worked out in France today beyond a slogan to mask gross and growing inequalities. And what would Paul Revere think of Donald Trump – that hard, dangerous ride for this! As a species we are indeed like those children sitting in the marketplace. On the one hand we deplore something, and then we bemoan its absence just like those who cannot accept the ascetic John, but no more can they accept a convivial Jesus.

Jesus was the revolutionary. Jesus expressed both the will and the love of God. John was looking for winnowing fire, Jesus brought unconditional love. Many sought a Messiah who would wreck vengeance on those who had persecuted Israel. Jesus brought love your enemies. Even those who wrote much of scripture could not imagine a God who would not come with vengeance in fire and brimstone. Jesus said forgive not 7 times but 77 times.

Would Jesus' approach work? How would we know? We have never tried it on any scale. I just bet those officials in Tennessee last week who tried and failed in the killing of a 50-year- old woman for a crime she committed 32 years ago would describe themselves as devout Christians. Doubtless they are hoping she gets well enough for them to try again.

As Shaw wrote at the end of St. Joan, O God that madest this beautiful earth, when will it be ready to accept thy saints? How long, O Lord, how long? Amen

***From Raymond Schwager, Must There be Scapegoats? Violence and Redemption in the Bible quoted in Saved From Sacrifice, a Theology of the Cross by S. Mark Heim.**