



My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In today's Gospel, we hear that John the Baptist is in prison. He sends messengers to Jesus to ask Him if He is the One to come. Some have interpreted this as John pointing his disciples away from himself and to Jesus. While this is certainly a move that John could have made – after all, his whole ministry was to prepare the way for Christ, he pointed to Christ as “the Lamb of God” (John 1:29, 36), and he said of Jesus, “He must increase; I must decrease” (John 3:30) – I think it may be something else. It may be John in the darkness of prison is questioning if Jesus really is the Christ, questioning his own relationship with God. Some have tried to steer away from this possibility trying to defend John and his holiness, but even saints go through periods of desolation.

As I have mentioned before, I went to the Theology of the Body and the Interior Life conference a few weeks ago. There, we spent the week learning about St. Ignatius' 14 Rules of Discernment of Spirits. The bulk of the rules speak about spiritual desolation and how to combat it in our lives. One of the things we learned is that in desolation, the enemy (the world, the flesh and the devil) reinterprets the past and the future for us. When we are in desolation, the future looks impossibly bleak. In desolation, we can question the past: Did I really have an experience of God? Am I really loved by Him? Many times, we can think that we imagined all of it, and that God really wouldn't want to have anything to do with us.

I see this as a possibility of what St. John went through. He's in prison. He may now be starving (without his usual locusts and honey to munch on). He was probably beaten. He may have been tortured. Most likely, he didn't see much of the sun. He knew his death was imminent (though, with Herod's fascination of him, the delay could go on and on). When we are surrounded by things which cause non-spiritual desolation (discouragement, depression, etc.), they can lead to spiritual desolation (feeling separated from God, feeling repulsive to God, not seeing any future for our spiritual life). If John fell into spiritual desolation – which happens to every saint, which happens to every person who in some way is trying to grow in his or her relationship with God – that desolation may have reinterpreted his past: “Did I really hear God speak to me about who the Messiah is? Could I have imagined it? My whole ministry is a failure. Is this really what God wanted for me?” Without seeing the “winnowing fan” in the hand of Jesus, driving away sinners and bringing about the Kingdom of Heaven, John might very well have questioned everything.

Jesus' answer is clear, though: See the works I do. See how they manifest the Kingdom as spoken of by Isaiah. It is I. You have fulfilled your mission.

In our lives, we can get discouraged. When we fall into spiritual desolation, we may feel that all that we thought we knew about God is straw. We may end up thinking there is no hope for us because of the depth of our sin and inability to keep our resolves. The truth is that everyone goes through this. This is the normal spiritual life – ups and downs, intermixed with periods of tranquility. There's absolutely **no shame** in the fact that we are tempted, that we are attacked with desolation. We should not be surprised at all. *This is normal!* The important thing is what we do with ourselves during the desolation. John went to Jesus, revealing his own doubts. When we struggle, let us also go to Jesus and allow Him to dispel our darkness.