

3rd Sunday Advent Year “B”

December 13-14, 2014 (7:00p, 12:00 Noon, 5:00 pm) “*What do you have to say for yourself?*”

Readings: Isaiah 61:1-2a, 10-11; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28

In life, there are good questions and there are not so good questions, and it does not take a Ph.D. in order to discern the difference. I always dreaded the question, “What do you have to say for yourself?” It’s not a good question, whether it came from Mom or, in today’s Gospel, from the priests and Levites. The question “Who are you?” is not much better, I am afraid.

Perhaps you have had the experience of being confused with someone else, misidentified. Or if not, people may have assumed things about you because of others in your family. When I was a High School Junior, I entered a Math classroom on the first day. The teacher recognized the last name and remarked that he had taught my older brother...I could see it coming... “He was the best student I taught. I am looking forward to having you in class.” I thought to myself, “No you aren’t. Wait until you see how I do in math!” It was not my best subject. I am not my brother!

John the Baptist was believed to be several different people, none of whom he was. The priests and Levites became exasperated with him. They asked, “Who are you,” and “What do you have to say for yourself?” But he was John. He had to communicate that fact, without it dominating the conversation, because he was there for a different reason. In a world where it is all about us, he stands as a stark contrast. It was and is about another, not ourselves.

The Lord anointed St. John the Baptist to be a prophetic voice in the desert, calling people beyond that which meets the eye, towards what is eternal. John neither claimed to be Elijah, come back in the flesh, nor Moses, which was the likely reference to their question, “Are you the prophet?”

Make no mistake about the fact that the heavy-hitters– the priests and Levites– most likely Sadducees, were questioning John in this case. These were the classes who represented those who were empowered under the Law to make religious decisions. This was an official inquiry.

It was an established belief in the time of Jesus that the prophet Elijah would return to earth to take a part in the establishment of God’s kingdom. This comes from the Book of Malachi in the Old Testament (Mal. 3:23), “Lo, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the day of the Lord comes.” Opinions were divided on precisely what role this figure would play, but all agreed that his return would signal the immediate coming of the day of salvation. It would signal a restoration of all things.¹

Jesus stated in another place that John had indeed fulfilled this mission of the messenger, yet he in fact was not literally Elijah. But many became mired in the externals of John. He was a mysterious figure, not like one for whom they had waited. He was severe, exhibiting strange habits with respect to food and clothing. So from one perspective he stood out like a sore thumb. Yet, he continued to deflect the attention. “What do you have to say for yourself?”

We need to answer this question in our lives with respect to our faith. Are we fervent, are we pointing the way by our actions and words to another, to Him in whom we place all our trust, and in whom we find our salvation? Do we too quickly take the credit for our successes, or do we attribute our true strength to the Lord?

In the 4th century, one early theologian speculated that some people actually desired to hear John the Baptist more than Jesus. They

¹ Cf. Commentary on the Gospel of John, Rudolph Schnackenburg, vol.1, p. 289

were not unaware of Jesus, but they were more intrigued by the messenger. In his commentary on John's Gospel, St. John Chrysostom concluded that the people wished "rather to have him for their teacher, they did not dare to say so plainly, but ... thinking by their flattery to induce him to confess that he was the Christ."²

Sometimes people are more attracted to the messenger than the message. It remains a danger in Church ministry, even to this day. John the Baptist bore painful witness to this faulty reasoning. It is about the Lord, it is about the message. It is about our response to the saving message of the Gospel. Christ is the fulfillment of the promises of all the prophets, among whom the greatest was John the Baptist, called to "prepare the way" for the Messiah (cf. Mt 11: 9-10).

We owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to St. John the Baptist, who himself, while hardly polished in appearance, speech or otherwise, radically allowed himself to be transformed by love, and breathed the fire of the Holy Spirit, sharing its power with whomever would listen. And he always pointed to another. His speech led the way, his words helped to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord. He was the last and greatest of the prophets.

Some day we will need to answer the ultimate question about our lives, a question asked by the just judge himself: "What do you have to say for yourself?" May God guide us, so that we may have a worthy answer.

² John Chrysostom, homilies on St. John: Homily XVI (John 1.19)