

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday Advent Year “B”

December 16-17, 2017

*Where Nobody Knows Your Name*

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

One of the more popular theme songs in television belonged to a hit 1980’s sitcom that mostly took place in a bar. The key line in the jingle went like this: “Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name.” This is certainly true, as it makes people feel welcome and valued. People generally speaking do not want to be strangers.

In our Gospel today, several questions are asked, one of which is simply, “Who are you?” This itself can be a bit disarming. At times, it is merely asked in an inquisitive sense, while at others it may take on an accusatory tone, akin to “Who do you think you are?” But as this question was posed to John the Baptist, he did not appear to be uncomfortable or offended.

The follow up question was even more pointed– “Are you Elijah? No. Then, “Are you the prophet?” Here, the prophet may have referred to Moses. The presentation here is of Jesus as the prophet in the line of Moses. Another passage in Acts of the Apostles hints at this, namely that the Israelites were to learn the will of Yahweh from no one but their prophets.<sup>1</sup>

For these reasons, John was the subject of many questions, and no doubt, some suspicion. “Who are you?” One could legitimately add, “And why are you here?” People are not always quick to trust when we ask questions, even innocent ones. I have witnessed my fair share of friendly jabs at the capital city of Saint Paul, especially when people describe what is unique about those of us this side of the river. We ask many questions: “Where did you go to high School?” “What street did you grow up on?”

Those seem like perfectly legitimate questions to me, but they are a bit amusing to others, perhaps seen as quaint, if not invasive. But

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. footnotes from New American Bible at Acts of the Apostles 3:22.

that is not how we see it. Regardless, we just want to know some things about our neighbors. Like clockwork, following a major crime in the national news, media members swarm to the neighborhood of the alleged criminal, asking questions of neighbors. I am amazed when the response comes back, “No one really knew him...we never really talked to him...he kept to himself.”

John the Baptist was presumed to be several different men, none of whom he was. The priests and Levites were exasperated. They asked, “Who are you,” and “What do you have to say for yourself?” But he was John. He had to communicate the truth, without it dominating the conversation. After all, he was there for a different reason. In a world where it is all about us, John stands as a stark contrast. It was then and is now about another, not himself.

There is virtue in being beneath the radar, out of the spotlight, even anonymous. Many people seek anonymity because it is comfortable. Others pine for it, because due to their positions, they accept the fact that they have forfeited much of their privacy on account of their position; a smaller number, like John, neither seek to be known, nor do they feel a need to stand out. They just do their jobs.

Many come here to this Church, whether for Mass or confession, precisely because it is anonymous. Many seek the confessional screen, knowing that their identity is of no relevance in that moment. It becomes a safe place where nobody knows your name.

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, nor anyone else. His identity was immaterial.

We owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to St. John the Baptist, who while hardly polished in appearance, speech or otherwise, radically allowed himself to be transformed by love. He breathed the fire of

the Holy Spirit, sharing its power with whomever would listen. And he always pointed to another.

He would have preferred to remain anonymous. His words about another 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: “Who are you?” May God guide us, so that we may provide a most worthy answer, not by presenting our *curriculum vitae*, but simply by our own actions. May we be known by our love.