

Advent III.A (12/16/07)

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A very intriguing pair in this morning's Gospel. Here is John, the last prophet of the Old Covenant. Here is Jesus, the first and *only* prophet of the New Covenant.

There are similarities between the two: John and Jesus are both revolutionaries—they agree that the old way no longer works, that a new way is crying out to be born. God and his people cannot keep on doing business as usual—we have broken too many promises; our infidelities are too great; the thread of trust is too thin. God and we must strike a new deal. But how? And here is where Jesus and John diverge.

John is a firebrand, a stirrer-of-the-pot. He has no time for pleasantries, no taste for dialogue, no stomach for compromise. For him, life has no shades of gray, things are black and white, bad or good. Of course, with an attitude such as this, John is bound to run into the powers that inhabit unpleasant places. Which is where we find him today: in prison. Now there is no evidence that John finds jail burdensome; the food is probably better than the locusts and wild honey that usually comprised his diet. Further, John was probably proud that he was in jail; he may have even suspected that everyone who was *not* in prison in evil times had a fault in his faith.

So John sends his followers to find out what is up with Jesus, in whom he had set such bright hopes. He asks Jesus, “Are he who is to come—that is the promised Messiah—or shall we look for another?”

Do you hear the edge to John's voice? Perhaps a little offended, too. Are you the *one*? Whose side are you on? Why are you running around free while I am bound? What compromise have you made with the powers of the world that they let you alone? Why do you consort with the very sinners that I curse? Do you really expect to save sinners by talking with them, eating with them, smiling at them, touching them? There is a radical difference between what John and Jesus think should be done about our broken relationship with God.

And how does Jesus reply? He neither explains nor excuses. He simply says, "The blind see, the deaf hear, cripples walk, lepers are cleansed, the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is he that takes no offense at me."

In other words: "John, what you see is what you get. According to the signs foretold by the prophet Isaiah, these are the sure signs of the Messiah. You may not like my style, but you cannot argue with the results. Nor can you argue with the way my Father chooses to inaugurate his new covenant with this rebellious human race. Don't be offended, John."

Now lest we think that our Lord is displeased with John, Jesus does give him praise:

"Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist."

What an amazing declaration! Greater than Abraham, the father of Israel? Greater than Moses, the liberator and lawgiver? Greater than Ruth and the Judges? Greater than the Prophets who spoke for God? Yes, greater, says Jesus.

Greater than all of these is John because without him all that Abraham and Moses and the prophets and the judges had made possible, would have expired. Without John, minds and hearts of those in Judea would not have ached for the one who baptizes with spirit and fire. Without John there would have been no community prepared by repentance to receive the Savior.

Greater than all born of woman is John, says Jesus. Not because he was intelligent or successful or disciplined or holy, though all these he was. John is greater because he saw his duty, saw the purpose for which God had created him and sent him out into the world—*and he did it.*

So John is the greatest mortal who ever lived ... except. Jesus makes an exception to his claim about John. Did you catch it? John is the greatest except for *who?* YOU and me. We, those who are baptized into God's kingdom. Even if we are the least in the kingdom of God, we are greater than John. How can this be so?

It's simple. John's purpose was to *prepare* the way for the Savior—and did it. But your purpose and mine is to *manifest* the Savior to others. We are signs, walking sacraments, if you will, of him who is the way, the truth and the life—Jesus Christ our Lord. Week by week, we are renewed in this identity in a most literal way, as we receive into ourselves the Body and Blood of our Savior, and become “little Christs” which is what the word “Christian” means—little Christs, little anointed ones. It is the Body and Blood of Christ that we receive in Holy Communion that transubstantiates us into Christ's presence in the world.

By our baptisms, and by our Communion Jesus is in us. In us, Jesus lives. In us, Jesus gives. We are Jesus re-presenters. For anyone to meet Jesus, they must first meet us. For better or worse this is so. To the extent that we re-present Jesus well, other will be drawn to him. To the extent we do not, they will be repelled. In a very real way, Jesus' reputation is dependent upon us. This is our dignity. It is also our terror, for his Father will judge us upon our exercise of this ministry.

And we know the way to be this sign of Jesus to others. It is very simple: imitate Jesus. Let us be willing to bear the burden of such great a dignity—to confess our failures—and to return again and again to him whose representatives we are, that he may give us what we need for the task to which he has called us.

John praised John for knowing who he was: the prophet who prepares the way for the Savior, for accepting his identity, and for doing it. And Jesus' praise awaits us who accept our identity, embrace our duty, and do it. On the Day of Judgment, when Christ returns to judge both the living and the dead, we will hear Jesus say, "Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."