

Advent III (17 Dec. 2023)

“Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another?”

+In the Name of...

Perhaps the most famous quote of St. Francis of Assisi is paraphrased as follows: “Preach the Gospel. If necessary, use words.” It is a more elegant way of putting some of our more modern phrases such as “Practice what you preach” and “Your actions speak so loudly I cannot hear what you are saying.” St. Francis knew what many televangelists have yet to figure out: Christians have the ability to attract many more followers for Christ by leading a virtuous Christian life than we ever will by beating anyone over the head with a Bible.

An equally real problem for preachers and prophets is not being able to say things in a way that their followers can understand. This was the case for John the Baptist. At first one might be tempted to think that John the Forerunner (as the Baptist is sometimes called), did not recognize the One Whom he

had foretold was coming. In the Gospel appointed for this morning, he seems to have sent some of his followers to ask Jesus who He was. Yet, he had predicted the coming of Our Lord several times. It is much more likely that this question was for the benefit of John's disciples, and not for himself. They were so enthralled with the one whom they were following, they were reluctant to forsake him and follow another, even though they knew that was inevitable. You may remember from a couple of chapters ago when John's followers aligned themselves with the Pharisees to ask Jesus why His followers did not fast. It was a legitimate question; Christ's issue was with John's disciples joining forces with the Pharisees, not their devotion to fasting. My mother always warned me that I would be judged by the company I kept. Perhaps that was not a common saying in first-century Jerusalem. While it seems counterintuitive, John's followers are hoping that Jesus will answer in the negative: "No, I am not He; keep waiting." If you were to ask them individually or as a group, of

course they would say they wanted the Messiah to come... but not just yet. They liked the status quo, although perhaps without their leader in prison. They liked being close to the one who was being followed with interest. How would that change under the Messiah? We often perceive the unknown as more frightening than the known, regardless of how unsatisfactory the known might be.

John finds himself in prison, so he sends his disciples to ask their question of the Christ. John knows the answer, but he wants his disciples to hear it from the source. “You need look no longer.” For those of you with children, it will perhaps remind you of arguments with them. You can tell your children something a hundred times and they won’t believe you, but then a favorite teacher or coach or a beloved uncle tells them the exact same thing and they come home crowing about what they have learned as if someone had given them the recipe for gold. You nod to yourself sarcastically, “Gee, why didn’t I think of that...?”

Jesus, of course, was an excellent teacher. He doesn't just answer the question "Yes" or "No", but helps John's disciples discover the answer for themselves. "What have you seen? The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the deaf hear, and if that isn't enough, the dead are raised up." Jesus does not say what I'm about to say, but the obvious conclusion is, "If those things are not proof enough of the Messiah, what proof would you accept?" These miracles were foretold in the Scriptures that John's disciples knew so well, and now they have seen them happen before their very eyes. How many of us could see all those miracles and then still be able to ask, "So are you the one we're waiting for or is there somebody who is going to do something even more spectacular?" More spectacular than raising the dead? Really?

Jesus goes on to say "Blessed is he who shall not be offended in me." Would anything Christ have said offend John? No, quite the contrary: John foretold Christ's coming, and nothing Christ

taught was in opposition to the teachings of John. We should be wary of those who find Christ and his message offensive. St. Paul tells us in his first letter to the Corinthians that both Christ and His cross will be a stumbling block to many; His message is not always an easy one to hear.

Christ also wants to show His approval for all that John did before Him. That is why He asks John's followers why they went out into the wilderness? St. Hilary of Poitiers, to whom we are indebted for his work on the Nicene Creed, explains that the term "wilderness" implied being devoid of the Holy Ghost. Moreover, a reed looks attractive on the outside, but inside is hollow and unstable. It bends to and fro with every change in the wind. John was the opposite of the reed – he was anything but empty or fickle. The next rhetorical question to them is if they were looking for a man wearing soft raiment. Again the answer is "no" because the term means luxurious clothing. The king of kings did not come to live in a luxurious palace, but to save the lost and down-

trodden. The camel's hair-clad, locust-eating Baptist was anything but luxurious. And lastly Our Lord asks if they were looking for a prophet. But John was not just a prophet, Jesus answers Himself, because this was the Prophet who foretold the Christ. He was the only Prophet not only to tell of the coming of Jesus, but to also see and know Him. Remember, John was the cousin of Our Lord, but was a mere six months older than Him. You may remember from the Gospel of Luke that John leapt in the womb of Elizabeth when Mary came to visit her cousin and tell of the marvelous news the angel had delivered to her when she conceived. John is the only prophet to bridge the Old and New Testaments, and Jesus tells us that no greater prophet was ever born.

So there can be little doubt that John knew exactly who the Christ was when he sent his disciples to question Jesus, but it was for their benefit. The question for us then, is when are we like John's disciples? That is, when do we pay lip service to wanting the world to be won for Christ, but in reality, we like things just

the way they are? “Sure, it would be great if everyone believed in Jesus, as long as nothing has to change in my little world.”

Please allow me to share a quote from Fr. Raymond Raynes, Anglican priest and missionary to Africa:

Men... did not want to come to the light, because of the moral revolution within themselves that would have to take place. To preach of the new world after [World War II] in terms of economic justice and the vague application of Christian principles was easy. People liked to hear this, because they could think they were fighting for a better world without themselves having to become better men. But they did not like to hear preaching about the things that could make them better, such as prayer and faith. Social evils were becoming a useful means of ignoring private sins.

Now I know one objection you will raise to this logic: after World War II society viewed Christian principles as a “good” thing. Yes, but according to Fr. Raynes that is almost a part of the problem. What’s more, today we can just as easily be lulled into a false sense of security when leaders in society start talking about “morals” or “values that we can all agree on”. I submit to you that no soul has ever been saved purely on the basis of “morals and

values”, as good as they are. Especially in today’s world, where it is so easy to point out the shortcomings in our deviant society. This is precisely what Fr. Raynes is counseling against. The best way to address the social ills of our time is to wage war against private sin. And whose private sin do we know better than our own? Not wishing to confront it is human nature. John’s disciples were perfectly content to keep listening to John and not have to face the reality of the converted life the Saviour would require. Are we also content to listen to the Church beat the drum against the evils of our society, but refuse to face the darkness in the recesses of our own soul? The kingdom is made one soul at a time. We as the Church must set the example for those who have yet to come to know Christ. No one else in society is going to step in to fill the void. Correction, they will, but not with anything you or I want to use as filler!

In this last full week of Advent 2023, let us examine our spiritual lives. Is there anything we are allowing to get in the way



of serving Him? Is there anything that makes us comfortable that is holding us back? We know He comes as a babe in the manger in just over a week. But the Second Coming we know neither the day nor the hour. This is He that should come. There is no other to look for. Let us do all we can to ready ourselves, and by doing that, readying those around us.

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