

Advent III
12/13/2020

A HERALD HONEST AND HUMBLE

John the Baptist called people to repent, to turn around and to be baptized. Now this was not the sacrament of baptism as we know it. Obviously, Jesus hasn't died and risen yet and hasn't given the Great Commission to baptize in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Ritual washings were a known practice at that time and John's baptism was an act of repentance, but it did not take away sin as does the Sacrament of Baptism.

The purpose of John's baptism was for people to confess their sins and so as to avoid them in the future and to prepare them for the coming of Christ. This reminds us that the first step in dealing with sin is to admit that we have sinned and then to share it, not just in our heart, but in the Sacrament of Reconciliation where we grow in honesty and where we also receive God's grace and mercy to do better. When we do that, we too prepare the way of the Lord.

John called people out, he challenged them but to bring them closer to God. He didn't go with the flow but rather against the tide of his society. G.K. Chesterton remarked, *A dead thing goes with the stream, but only a living thing can go against it.*

Like John the Baptist, the Church cries out in the desert, often going against the tide. When we proclaim the Gospel of Life amidst a culture of death. When we speak of peace amidst war and violence. We call out for economic justice and spiritual values in a consumerist and throwaway culture. When we talk of the dignity of the human person against racism and economic injustice. When we speak of the dignity of human sexuality in a culture that both idolizes and trivializes it. We cry out with a noble message that can be compromised by some of its messengers.

Going against the tide and truly living the Christian life can meet with resistance. The freedom of religion that we so value in this country has been accompanied by what is sometimes called the last acceptable prejudice of anti-Catholicism. Unlike many of our brothers and sisters in other parts of the world we may not face getting killed for practicing our faith but there are other ways this

prejudice can exert itself. To fully embrace what our faith teaches and to truly testify to the light in its fullness can result in marginalization: personally, socially, professionally and even economically. The faith is a free gift but it also has a cost and we see that in the lives of many of the saints, both canonized and non-canonized.

John came to testify to the light. He was its herald. John the Baptist knew who he was and he who he was not. He was *honest*. You could say that he was a supporting actor and that he knew his job was to get on stage when required, to say his lines, to get off stage and never, never to get in the way of the star. –He didn't want to be who he wasn't. It would have been easy for people to think that. In fact, they already were thinking that. He faced the temptation that many in power and esteem face and that is to fall for his own act.

John the Baptist lived his life in honesty and he's a model in that for us. To be all who we are meant to be but not to be who we are not. That means as followers of him who said, *I am the truth*, we are to live honest lives. Sometimes that will be a struggle for us and there is a temptation to lie. Why do we do that? Because we are afraid. We are afraid of the truth. And because we are afraid of the truth, we opt to lie. Students lie about their grades because they are afraid of the truth that they did not do so well. People lie about their age because they are afraid of the truth of how old they really are. And the list goes on but at the root of lies, there is fear. When we lie we end up telling more lies to cover those lies up and so often people find out. Lying can drain our emotional energy including when we try to remember who we lied to and what we lied about. Jesus would also say, *The truth shall set you free*. In truth there is freedom.

So John's honesty kept him on track but there was something else as well. Connected to that honesty was another virtue—*humility*. John the Baptist was humble. So often we can have a negative understanding of humility. Perhaps we see it as putting ourselves down or having an unhealthy self-image. But those are caricatures of humility. People who always brag about themselves and people who always put themselves down are both talking about themselves.

True humility is based on honesty of who we are and who we are not and, importantly, who God is. True humility is a source of freedom. Pride is something heavy that weighs us down. Humility doesn't care about honor, recognition and the like. True humility is content and something freeing. Humility has been described

as a guardian of virtue and as a cloak that covers all the other virtues. It lifts that cloak only in the service of charity.

John the Baptist was a herald of the Lord. With honesty and humility he prepared the way of the Lord and testified to the light. With lives of intentional faith, informed by the word of God, fortified by prayer, encouraged by one another, strengthened by the sacraments and nourished by the Eucharist, with lives marked by honesty and humility, may we prepare the way of the Lord and, in every little way, testify to the light who is Christ.