

SPG#147, Advent 2A

December 9, 2007 – Fr. Charles Pope

Isaiah 11:1-10

Romans 15:4-13

Matthew 3:1-12

Today's gospel paints a colorful portrait of one of the most prominent people in the New Testament, John the Baptizer. John is presented as one who wore camel's hair with a leather belt. He was known as one who ate locusts and wild honey as part of his diet.

In today's gospel he calls the Pharisees a "brood of vipers." And today he is quoted as saying, "I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

John is certainly prominent in the New Testament, but not because there are many references to him, or that many accounts of him. But his prominence is related to his being outrageous. And the gospel writers are careful to portray him in just that light, as an outrageous itinerant preacher, who looked strange, who had a strange diet, and who said outrageous things.

But his prominence is also related to his function. Because he has been known as the forerunner, the one who announced the coming of the Messiah as he said, "Prepare the way of the Lord."

And there is an implicit invitation in the gospels, I think, to further consider this outrageous figure of a man. In doing so you may recall the events around his parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth, just before his birth. When Elizabeth, who is pregnant with John, is visited by Mary, who is pregnant with Jesus, the baby in Elizabeth's womb leaps. This meeting is traditionally known in the church as the Visitation. We celebrate it on May 31, the date of my ordination to priesthood. Also, before the birth, his father, Zechariah, is visited by the angel Gabriel. Gabriel tells Zechariah of the coming birth of John, and that he will be, "filled with the Holy Spirit, even before his birth." Gabriel also said that he would appear along the same lines as Elijah the Prophet in the Old Testament. Sometimes you might read the story of Elijah. He as an equally colorful and outrageous figure. When Zechariah questioned how this birth might be possible, with his wife, who was past childbearing age, and he, who was an older man, he was struck mute, and could not speak. Later, he regained the use of his speech.

If you put these events, that occurred before his birth, with what he looked like, what he acted like, and what he said, you come away with a striking picture of a man.

But it all seemed a prelude to his true role as forerunner. And all that John said was aimed at preparing the way for the Messiah.

We could say that he was consumed with preparing the way. We could say that he was deeply passionate about it. We could say that he found his purpose in life in preparing the way for the Messiah. And so after years of practicing this vocation as a forerunner,

John hears of Jesus and his healings and his teaching. And he sends word to Jesus with the question that is uppermost on his mind. Once he heard of Jesus, it was the question he lived with day and night. "Are you the one, or should we look for another?"

And then, once it was confirmed, that Jesus really was the Messiah, then John set about getting out of the way. And he said, "I must decrease so that he may increase."

And so John the Baptizer appears as the first of many who were absolutely single minded and unswerving in their devotion, in their service. Many of the apostles were known to be just this focused in their following of Jesus. And yes, Jesus himself shows this single mindedness, this unswerving focus as he moved with his disciples toward Jerusalem, to death and resurrection.

It falls to us then, in Advent 2007 to take stock of our own lives in the shadow of John the Baptizer, who gave his all to be the forerunner. It falls to us, who witness his life through the Word of God, to reexamine our own lives in light of the testimony of John the Baptizer.

It may be that we see ourselves as beneath a spiritual giant. And I can imagine that the followers of John must have wrestled with something similar. And it may be that in those times John was unequalled in clarity of purpose and focus. And when we run into someone like that, they are at once captivating and disturbing. Captivating in the sense of their unswerving devotion, disturbing as we contrast ourselves to them.

And the contrast may be part of our problem as we take stock of ourselves. For we may think in terms of pass fail, or win lose. How could I be as spiritual as John the Baptizer?

How could I be as spiritual as Jesus Christ? And so there may be an implicit sense of failure as we contrast ourselves. But it is important to note that John did contrast himself to Jesus. John already knew that he was not the star of the show. He knew that he was the forerunner. And he was always looking for ways to clarify that contrast, and to bring it to completion.

John the Baptizer is a model for us in contrasting oneself to Jesus Christ. And in any in-depth study of John, in our own faith, we wind up following his lead in contrasting ourselves to Jesus Christ.

When you consider your life, who you are, what you do, and you contrast your life with that of Jesus Christ, what clarifications occur to you? That really is an Advent question.

All of us in Christ are created in purpose and for a direction. And we spend our lives discerning that purpose, that direction. And so in Advent 2007, what clarifications occur to you? When you walk through the stories of John the Baptizer and the coming of the Messiah, this year, what more do you know about yourself? It is a question for all of us.

And so let us be busy in answering it, and let us be faithful in helping each other as we compare and contrast. If we are diligent in searching and in clarifying, then we, like John will be preparing the way of the Lord. Amen.