

Tablet Article - December 4, 2005

Second Week of Advent, Year B

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John the Baptist may very well be called the patron of change and transition. He represents for us a passage to the new. He gives us hope when hope only seems like a dream. He knows that in spite of darkness the dawn is approaching.

John may very well even be called the patron of silence—a strange title in a loud and noisy age. From the very beginnings of his stirrings in the silence of his mother's womb, through the silence of his unknown upbringings, through the silence of his desert life, to the silence of his imprisonment, to the silence of his own tongue in his beheading—there is a voice that cries out clearly and distinctly. It is a voice that rocks the stillness, a voice that points beyond itself, a voice that shakes the conscience of a king, a voice that draws us to a hitherto unknown word—the Word itself. From his leaping up in the womb of his mother to the banks of the Jordan, he had proclaimed the presence of the Lamb who takes away the world's sin.

The Baptizer knew that it was not about him, but he knew full well Who it was that it was all about. In essence his was the story of a life that prepared for and pointed to and proclaimed Life itself. His joy was to give God joy—to simply be the bridegroom and not the groom. And what joy must have been his, what inexplicable joy, in giving up everything for one's self so that Everything could be given to all.

John knew who he was, but better yet, he knew who he was not—and he rejoiced in that. Truth in self-knowledge is its own reward. “Are you the One who is to come?” they would ask him. He would simply respond, “No, I am not!” In defining who he was, however, he was most affirmative. He knew himself through his mission as “a voice crying out in the desert: ‘Make straight the way of the Lord’.”

Jesus, John's cousin, would affirm the Baptizer to be ‘the greatest and least of the prophets.’ He would now bring fulfillment to the words of the Prophet Isaiah: “Comfort, give comfort to my people.” And what comfort there is when expectation reaches fulfillment, when worry is transformed into wonderment, when waiting finally comes to its termination, when apparent impossibility becomes definitive reality. All this because one man would recognize and focus upon and give everything for the One who was so much greater than himself. He simply knew that it was not about him and he found his fulfillment in that. “He must increase” were John's words. “I must decrease.”

The Gospel of Mark in the Advent readings for this Sunday begins with the striking announcement that a messenger is being sent to prepare the way. How many messengers are sent to us everyday! How many, unmindful of themselves, are sent to say to us in their own unique and special way, “He is coming, get ready.” Loving acts—whether bold or mild—point to the Being which is Love itself.

The spirit of John the Baptist still dwells among us today in the message of repentance, of a change of heart, of turning back to the One who never turns away from us. It may happen in the most common or uncommon ways—whether in the tranquility of the monastery, or in the morning coffee break with a friend, or by the bedside of a dying patient, or in the gleeful look in the eyes of a child, or upon the battlefields of a remote country, or in the very voice that speaks with authority. John the Baptizer is telling us over and over again that things must change in our lives, in our hearts, in our homes, in our world, and in our Church. All this, if we are to be in any way worthy of a God who comes in human flesh to share our very existence.

The passionate and thunderous cry of the Baptist—so striking a contrast to the tranquility of his humble life—awakens in us the yearning to want to make a change for the better. More precisely—to fully commit ourselves to the Christ who comes to make all things new.

What needs to be changed in my life right now? Where do I begin? Perhaps a silent prayer to the one who points beyond himself. Perhaps a few intimate moments in communion with the one who tears down the old to make room for the new. Ask for courage, for strength to embrace with love all that change will inevitably bring. Then we will hear the Lord say: “Behold, I come quickly!”