

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Third Sunday of Advent
December 14, 2014

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There are not many advantages to old age. But one is no more jury duty! I always hoped to be excused. But last time, Roman collar and all, I was not only empanelled but the judge asked me to be jury foreman. Deliberations were tricky. As a juror I had to promote my own view, which is always easy for me, but also as jury foreman I had to moderate discussion fairly so all were heard. You may recall, fondly or otherwise, the routine. Just about the time you get settled into whatever reading you brought with you, the judge enters the waiting room to address the jury pool. He reminds them of the importance of jurors and how they are to weigh evidence.

On one occasion after the judge had finished and left, I did not return immediately to my book but thought a bit on the importance of witnesses under oath and how prosecutors and defense counsel try to make witnesses appear in very different light. I do not say that in any derogatory way. Preachers also choose words carefully.

John the Baptist was sent from God for testimony. He was a witness. There are two parts to the job description of a witness: He is to be an *observer*. And he has to *speak to others about what he has seen*. To be a good witness means to be a keen observer and then to be very clear in his testimony. A good witness sticks to his guns, as it were. If you are not sure what you have seen, or are not consistent in your testimony, your questioners will pick you apart. That is what sometimes happens in the examination and cross-examination in a court case.

John the Baptist was immensely popular. His headquarters down by the Jordan River was the place to see and be seen. This bug eater wearing animal skins was what Hollywood calls *box office*. In 20th Century Paris every hostess would try to get him for her *salon*! John's popularity was only increased by the fact he did not ask much of people in terms of practical detail, and nothing for himself. Had he promoted himself, John could have started an ascetic movement in a vast scale. This might have put it in competition with, and opposition to, the far more profound and far-reaching message of his cousin, who happened to be Our Lord Jesus Christ.

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None of us knows the degree of temptation suffered by John the Baptist. But we all do know about human nature. Ambition, and the desire to succeed in building up your own case, is never very far away. Yet for all his burning zeal, John only tried to get his hearers to lead decent lives.

So when John's interrogators arrived to make him out as a leader or powerbroker in his own right, John said, "I am just a voice." His function was as a road-builder. He was to clean things up so that the Messiah could operate. John the Baptist insisted he was the Lord's forerunner, not his proto-type. A witness is not the doer. He is not the deed. Nor is he the force behind the deed. A witness is the beholder of the light and the telling of it. As such, although he was technically the last of the Old Testament prophets and not the first Christian evangelist, John the Baptist was the first Christian witness. He was the first to point to Jesus and exclaim, "*Behold the Lamb of God.*"

You and I are called to be observers and then to give testimony. We do this principally by the conduct of our lives and only secondly by our words. Like John the Baptist, we are called not to bring attention to ourselves but to clear the paths for the coming of the Lord. We must be very clear about this or our questioners will pick us apart too.

Many people dismiss Advent as nothing more than a hurried month of holiday preparations. Perhaps you also are in the midst of those preparations right now. But the Advent message puts before us an important and very contemporary question: how do we attribute the happening of events? Do we ascribe them to worldly powers and forces, or to Almighty God? In the first century, many said the obvious cause of religious and social upheaval was the Roman occupation of Palestine. But in all of it John the Baptist saw the hand of God. Advent asks what we think about the future. What do we really believe is coming? And what is our expectation? One way or other you and I will be making our witness as we give answer to those questions.