

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Second Sunday of Advent
December 6, 2015

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Saint Luke wastes no time telling us about the appearance and manner of John the Baptist. And John himself gets right to the point! His message for Israel is urgent. The people must know the Lord's anointed One has come. *Things will never be the same.* To make his point, John uses the ultimate attention grabber: the words of Israel's most famous prophet. People will always listen to the words of Isaiah.

Every valley shall be filled,

And every mountain and hill shall be brought low

And the crooked shall be made straight

And the rough ways shall be made smooth:

And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

There had been no prophetic voice in Israel for three hundred years. The people were thrilled by the sight and sound of John the Baptist. Great multitudes came out to the Jordan. John was a hot ticket! In Paris every hostess would want him for her *salon*. The people didn't even mind the rough language, being called a "brood of vipers." Prophets talked like that! *And this was a prophet.* That in itself was good news. But so was John's message. He said the Messiah was at hand. The Messiah, as everyone knew, would re-establish the reign of David and the supremacy of Israel in the political world.

When Our Lord Jesus did not do these things by the people's standards of expectation many Jews concluded Jesus was not the Christ. Later, by this wrong standard, Pontius Pilate concluded Jesus made no sense. But they all missed John the Baptist's urgent point. John was frantic in declaring when Christ came *nothing would be the same.* Judging Him by earthly standards would be like trying to sell a house by weight rather than by square foot! John's point was that *Christ Himself* is the standard by which all other things are measured and judged.

When a man sets up his business dealing in precious gems he does not get very good materials from his suppliers. Not at first. The dealers save the best stones for their long-time customers. Over the years the newcomer becomes a long-time

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customer and increasingly gains access to the best merchandise. The day comes when he has arrived at the top of his trade. This is when he regularly sees stones of such high quality that from then on no one will ever again have to tell him about quality. He has seen the best, and the best will forever be his standard against which all else would be judged and measured.

John the Baptist was not talking about the diamond trade! Nor was the prophet Isaiah. But they both insisted when Christ comes He Himself becomes the standard. Jesus is God. He shows us the way to God. He Himself is the way to God. He is the standard by which every approach to God is measured. Whether men and women know it or not, what Jesus says is true. “No one comes to the Father but by Me.”

God in Christ took the necessary step of becoming directly accessible to mankind so that we might return to Our Heavenly Father. And the Incarnation and subsequent Passion and Resurrection of Christ removed all the barriers. The valleys were filled and the hills brought low, the crooked made straight and the rough places smoothed over. In Jesus Christ the spiritual path to God becomes a level playing field. The jeweler saw the best and the best became the standard, making no further assessment system necessary. So too Jesus Christ is the best. He is the standard by which all else is judged.

In a strange and marvelous way that is what happens. There is a collective witness, a cross-cultural recognition. It spans centuries and racial, economic, and intellectual differences. It involves children, Nobel prize winners, people with physical or mental impairments, criminals behind bars, and even many who do not consider themselves Christian but who abhor violence. Jesus is the standard by which humanity itself is judged.

John the Baptist urged his hearers to reconsider Isaiah in the context of the coming of God Incarnate. “All flesh shall see the salvation of God.” This was no longer a hope or pious dream. John could point at Jesus and say, “look over there.” To see Christ for Who He is was to be converted. The Lord’s approach is directly to a human heart, a heart made by Him and for Him. And when the Lord says, “I am

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the way” the heart will respond in love. It will have seen the best. And then there simply is no other.