

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Third Sunday of Advent
December 13, 2015

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Our Lord Jesus said of John the Baptist “No one born of woman is greater than he.” This was God’s verdict and His is the only opinion that counts! John is a class of humanity in himself. And the Lord’s declaration was *His* choice, singling out John for Himself. That means for all time John the Baptist is the divinely appointed model for those who are called to devote themselves to preparing God’s ways.

The Old Testament gives accounts of the prophets who told about the Lord Who *was* to come. John showed his countrymen Our Lord *present among them*. That alone made John unique among prophets. But there was much more! Not only was John singled out by God Incarnate, but his life was consecrated even before he was born. Scripture says John the Baptist was sanctified in the womb of his mother Elizabeth during that mysterious event of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary. That incident is next week’s Sunday gospel. It describes far more than the social call of a young pregnant woman on her older, and also expectant, cousin. The Lord Jesus, alive in His mother Mary, sanctified John. And in response John leaped in his own mother’s womb. Later, as an adult, John the Baptist would say he rejoiced “with joy because of the bridegroom’s voice.”

There is a wonderful and strange affinity between John the Baptist and Our Lord Jesus Christ. We don’t know enough about it to call it anything else. John *could not help thrilling* to Our Lord’s Presence. He gave up all other joys for the joy of hearing the Lord’s voice. Father Faber once said of John he had “a blessed inability to attach himself to the things of earth.” John knew where true joy was to be found, and there was no second place prize. No honorable mention.

After John’s birth scripture says, “and the child grew and was strengthened in spirit” and he “was in the desert until the day of his manifestation to Israel.” When that day came, John prepared the way of the Lord. This man, who began announcing Christ even before either of them was born, was still his cousin’s herald, preparing the people for the Word of God. At the Lord’s Baptism John declared for the first time that Jesus is the Son of God. After that, John transferred his own disciples to Jesus *and then disappeared*.

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There was no retirement party! No pocket watch! John was not even allowed the joy of living among Christ's disciples as a most honored senior member. Rather, John the Baptist was shut up in the terrible dungeon of Machaerus, Herod's fortress. And from prison it was a sad day when John, with his vision clouded, had to send an inquiry to find out if Jesus was the Christ. Even more tragic was John's death as the result of the sordid and squalid intrigue in Herod's court. Not only was John abandoned by others. We get the impression that Almighty God also abandoned John. And it is just that sense we have about Our Lord's own death on Good Friday. It is as if having shared in the mystery of Christ's Incarnation, John also shared the Lord's Passion, and *always as a forerunner*.

Being the forerunner is the common thread in the life of John the Baptist. Wherever the Lord came to men, John did the advance work. He went before Christ even before his birth. He went before Christ in his time in the desert and in his public life. John showed Christ to the world at the Lord's Baptism. John prepared his own disciples so they would recognize Christ and follow Him. John even went before the Lord to the kingdom of the dead. Before Christ descended into hell to set the souls of the dead free, John had preceded Him there.

John the Baptist was always preparing the way of the Lord. This appreciation is as old as the Church. In the 3rd century Origen wrote, "I think that the mystery of John is still being carried out in the world. If a man is to believe in Jesus Christ, the spirit and the power of John must first come into his soul and prepare for the Lord a perfect people."

Christ's coming continues. There is always an advent going on. And like the season of Advent, this advent always has John the Baptist in it. He prepares the way for what is about to happen in any and every spiritual unfolding, in every missionary development and awakening, hastening the coming of the Lord to souls, by his resounding call to repentance, to the *fruits* of repentance, and to conversion. And it is all done by way of the personal magnetism of John's *infectious jubilation*. No matter how stern the warning John preached, the people always asked "What then shall we do?" John's charism, from before his birth, was his focus. He is a "*one-joy man*." His only joy was to hear the voice of the Lord.