

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Second Sunday of Advent
December 4, 2016

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John the Baptist cried in the wilderness “Prepare ye the way of the Lord.” The message revealed the prophet’s one and only purpose. The purpose was to make a straight path for Christ into men’s hearts. About John it had been prophesied he would “give knowledge of salvation unto his people *by* the remission of their sins.” And that is exactly what John was doing at the River Jordan. The people were receiving a baptism of repentance as preparation for the coming of Christ into their hearts.

A straight path is the opposite of a crooked path. You and I know all about crooked paths, and crooked politicians also! We live in Boston! And painting with a broad brush we also know the so-called “progress of human civilization” has much in it we can call *a progress of lies*. Time and again the things that become commonly acceptable (what we call “conventional wisdom”) are a distortion of the truth. When this distortion happens slowly over a period of time, or is repeated constantly, the falsehood is difficult to detect or resist. I will not regale you with any political science wisdom, of which I claim none. But in the recent presidential election race newspapers like *The New York Times* not only distorted the reality of what was unfolding nationwide, but they believed their own lies. And when one hundred years ago men looking at maps over brandy and cigars in private London clubs set national boundaries for people in Africa and the Middle East, the stage was set for the problems the world has constantly faced ever since. What looked good on a crayon-marked map in a Paris or London gentlemen’s club was a recipe for repeated disaster for Sunni and Shiite Moslems and Kurdish people who actually live in Iraq. We must not forget the disappearing Christians, who in reality for centuries contributed to the “glue” which kept these places in order as working societies. After 2000 years there are no longer any Christians in Mosul. They have been killed or fled.

I mention all of this to give focus to the fact that John the Baptist was calling into question *the progress of lies* which had defiled Israel’s own religious thinking and world view. Along with many ancient cultures Israel contended it had a special and direct relationship to a divine being. Like its neighbors Israel believed the blood flowing in its veins was sacred. John the Baptist was not denying the unique

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covenant relationship Israel had with the One True God. Rather, it was *because the relationship was true and authentic* that John's ministry urgently called into question the crooked twists and turns of his own culture. John said it was sheer nonsense to assert a spiritual covenant could be turned into a racial, tribal, or legalistic tradition, and expect Almighty God to continue to support it. God will surely knock it down. John's way of saying this was, "The axe is laid to the root of the trees." Any notions of "blood superiority" diverted souls away from the critical issues that lead to repentance and the pursuit of holiness of life. John lampooned the notion the Hebrew bloodline was in itself a holy link to God guaranteeing preferential treatment. Again putting it his way, John said, "God is able from these very stones to raise up children of Abraham."

It is also a mistake when Catholics are pleased to think they are on the fast track to the Promised Land simply because they are riding the right bus! Like the ancient Jews, this mindset can distract us from the need for repentance and the cultivation of virtue. It is better to remember the Catholic Church also exists for those who are not in it!

No one can ever replace John the Baptist as the Lord's forerunner. The Lord's Kingdom is established on earth. But as *ambassadors for Christ* in our own day we can borrow something from John's operation notebook. When it was prophesied of John he would "Give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission of their sins" that shows what John did and how he did it. By bringing souls to the baptism of repentance, or penance, he was the means of enabling them to know Jesus.

We can best bring others to Christ by the same means as John the Baptist. This is by our penance and the consequent pursuit of personal sanctity. "Do as I say not as I do" hardly ever works. John was the very opposite of that. In fact he was so convincing a messenger he was called the morning star, "a burning and shining light." In that light even the Pharisees "were willing for a season to rejoice." (John 5:35)

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Souls will be attracted to Christ because they behold the power of the Lord illuminating the lives of penitent and forgiven sinners. That is the way to follow John the Baptist in making a straight path for Christ into men's hearts.