

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Third Sunday of Advent  
December 11, 2016

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There is *supreme value* attached to membership in the Kingdom of Heaven. We don't often think this way but we should. We have the highest authority for doing so. The Lord Jesus proclaimed, "None born of woman is greater than John the Baptist and yet the least in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than he." That is some statement!

John was morally faultless. Our Lord declared John's preaching of righteousness was "from Heaven." Zeal for God led John to martyrdom when all he had to do was keep his mouth shut. Yet for all that, it is said "John did no miracle." His only "sign and wonder" was his holy life. No permanent religious revival resulted from his preaching. John the Baptist could arouse contrition in his congregation. But he could not impart life.

All this shows the supreme apologetic of the Christian faith. It is only by *contact with Christ* a soul can acquire the spiritual power that imparts life. John had extraordinary gifts. He was the forerunner of Christ. But John was not a member of the community of faith whose members are of Christ's Body. St Paul tells the Ephesians that members of Christ are "of His Flesh and of His Bones."

It is staggering to contemplate how much potential holiness this union with Christ means in each of His followers. Members of the Body of Christ are much more than "saved souls" with card-carrying identification in their wallets! Christ's followers are "*saving* souls." The Epistle to the Hebrews puts it this way: All the Old Testament saints "of whom the world was not worthy" and who "obtained a good report through faith" could not be made perfect without us, God having provided some better thing for us.

Two verses in Saint John's Gospel give the perfect expression of this *better thing* for us. In Chapter Seven, Our Lord had gone up to Jerusalem secretly on the Feast of Tabernacles. On the last day of the feast He stood up and declared: "If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink." (7:37) Now if you and I were making up a religion the Saviour's next line would read: "And his thirst shall be quenched." Ta da! But *no*. The Gospel is far more exciting and wonderful than that. The very next words the Lord says are: "He that believeth on Me, as the scripture hath said, out

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of his belly shall flow rivers of living water.” (7:38) Anyone who is in Christ becomes in his turn a source from which the thirst of others may be quenched.

This is not even a passing, throw-away thought on the part of the Son of God. The Samaritan woman at the well heard the Lord declare the same thing. “The water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.” (4:14) Springing up from our inmost being is a power to change men’s natures and deepen their capacities and abilities for good. We know this can happen because time and again the lives of the saints show us this very thing. To repeat, members of Christ’s Kingdom are not just saved souls but *saving* souls.

We are not to worry in advance about results. In fact we are not to think of results at all! Our Lord’s direction to John’s disciples applies to us. He said, “Go and tell John what you hear and see.” You and I are to bear witness to the experience of Christ’s grace and truth within us and go and tell what we hear and see.

Listen again to the Lord. “He that believeth in Me, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water.” Does that describe you and me? The very *opposite* of John the Baptist was to be “a reed shaken in the wind” bending to the gales of unbelief and sinfulness that swirl in the world we inhabit. What shame is ours if we wear the “soft raiment” of those in “kings houses,” forgetting that such garb is used by the devil to snare us in materialism and away from the Lord. Is the promised life of grace, conferred upon us at Baptism, with all its powerful equipment for witness, imprisoned in our sorely distracted and diverted souls?

Saint John the Baptist was called “the friend of the Bridegroom.” So are we. But we are also *far more*. Saint Paul tells the Corinthians that Christians are “one flesh with [the Lord], and one Spirit.” Let us then determine by God’s grace in us to yield to no one in devotion to Christ Jesus. Let us live simply even in the midst of complexity. We can live St John’s desert life even in a great city by creating a spiritual desert through self-denials, so that we may be freed from the crafts and assaults of the devil. What wonderful gifts of God have been lavished upon those who belong to His Beloved Son. We are to take possession of the rights of our rebirth, that we may “think all the world” of Jesus: all for Him, and Him for all.