

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Third Sunday of Advent  
December 17, 2017

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I associate late fall and early winter with jury duty. There are not many advantages to growing old but one of them is no more jury duty! This year our parish secretary was summoned. She didn't get empaneled, but the occasion reminded me of the routine, which most of you know well. Just about the time you get settled into the reading material you brought along, the judge enters the jury pool room to address the people. He reminds them of the importance of jurors and how they are to weigh the evidence.

One time after the judge had finished his talk and left I did not return to my reading material. Instead I mused a bit on the importance of witnesses under oath, and how prosecutors and defense counsel try to make witnesses appear in a very different light. I do not say that in any derogatory way. Preachers, like lawyers, use words carefully.

We are told John the Baptist was sent from God for testimony. John was primarily a witness. And there are two parts to the job description. A witness has 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 giving testimony. A good witness sticks to his guns. If you are not sure about what you have seen, or are not insistent about it in what you say, your questioners will pick you apart. Think of the cross-examination in a court case.

John the Baptist was immensely popular. His headquarters down by the Jordan River was the place to be seen. Dressed in camels' hair and eating locusts and wild honey, John the Baptist was box office! In a later era every hostess in the city would try to get him for her *salon*. This popularity only increased when John did not ask much of people in terms of practical detail, and nothing for himself. My old friend and senior warden Charles Forest was a keen observer of human nature. He could remark "that man is an *op-operator*." Had John the Baptist been an *op-operator* he could have started an ascetic movement on a vast scale. It might have put him in competition with the far more-profound and far-reaching message of his cousin, Our Lord Jesus.

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

So when his interrogators tried to make him out to be a leader or a power 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 the Messiah could operate. John the Baptist insisted he was the Lord's forerunner, not his proto-type. Remember a witness is not the doer; he is not the deed; he is not 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.

You and I are called to be observers and then to give testimony, principally by the conduct of our lives, and then only secondly by our words. 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 that or our questioners will pick us apart.

For most people Advent is dismissed as a busy season of holiday preparations. But the Advent message of the Church asks a very contemporary question. Do we attribute the happening of events to worldly powers and forces, or to Almighty God? In the 1<sup>st</sup> Century many Jews said the obvious cause of religious and social upheaval was the Roman occupation. John the Baptist saw in all of it the hand of God. So use Advent with the Church. John the Baptist asks what you think about the future. What do you really believe is coming? What is your expectation? You and I will be making our witness as we give answers to those questions.