

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Second Sunday of Advent
December 9, 2018

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Of the four gospels only Saint Luke wastes no time telling us about the appearance and manner of life of John the Baptist. And in Luke's account, John gets right to the point! He has an urgent message for Israel. He wants the people to know the Lord's anointed One has come and that things will never be the same. To make his point, John uses the best attention-grabber available: he draws on the words of Israel's most famous prophet. People will listen to the words of Isaiah anytime, anywhere.

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.

For three hundred years there had been no prophetic voice in Israel. So the people were thrilled by the sight and sound of John the Baptist. Great multitudes came out to the Jordan River. They did not even mind being called a "brood of vipers." Prophets talked like that! And *this* was the real thing. That in itself was good news. But John's *message* was the great news: the Messiah was at hand. Everyone believed the Messiah would re-establish the reign of David and the supremacy of Israel in the world. So the band played "Happy Days are Here Again."

When Our Lord Jesus did not do these things by the people's standard of expectation, many concluded Jesus was *not* the Christ. Later on (and again by the wrong standard) Pontius Pilate would conclude Jesus made no sense. All of which means the people did not understand John's message. John was so urgent to declare that when Christ came, *nothing would be the same*. Judging Jesus by earthly standards would be like trying to sell a house by weight and not by square foot! John's point was *Christ Himself is the standard* by which all other things are judged.

When a newcomer sets up a jewelry store he does not get very good materials from his suppliers. Not at first. The wholesalers save the best stones for their long-time customers. Over the years the newcomer becomes a long-time customer and increasingly gains access to the best merchandise. The day comes when he has arrived at the top of the trade. His store has precious gems of such high quality no

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one will ever again tell him his stuff is second rate. He has found 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 how the jewelry wholesale business operates! Nor was the prophet Isaiah. But they were both insisting when Christ comes He Himself is 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 we might return to Our Heavenly Father. And the Incarnation, Passion, and Resurrection of Christ removed all the barriers between God and man. 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. When the jeweler once saw the best, the best became the standard. No further assessment system was necessary. Christ is the best, and the standard by which all else is judged.

In a strange and marvelous way *that is what happens*. There is a collective witness which is a cross-cultural recognition. It spans centuries and racial, economic, and educational differences. It involves children and people with impaired mental powers, criminals behind bars, and even many who do not consider themselves Christian, that Jesus is the standard by which humanity is judged.

John the Baptist was urging 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 distant hope or a pious dream. To recognize Jesus Christ was to be converted. His approach would be directly to the human heart. The human heart was made by Him, and for Him. When the Lord says, “I am the way,” the heart will respond in love. Why? It will have seen the best, and then *there is simply no other standard*.