

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Second Sunday of Advent  
December 8, 2019

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John the Baptist cried in the wilderness: “Prepare ye the way of the Lord.” That message revealed the prophet’s one and only purpose: 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.” (*Luke* 1:7) And that was 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.

There is a sense in which the so-called “progress of human civilization” is a *progress of lies*. Time and again many things which become commonly accepted are distortions of the truth. And when the distortion often happens slowly and repeatedly over a period of time, the falsehood is difficult to detect. We refer to Chicago as “the windy city” when the weather people insist it is windier on average in Boston! Many of the problems in modern day Iraq can be traced back to diplomats and statesmen in Western Europe setting up national borders for countries in the Middle East. What looked good on a map in Paris or London or Berlin was a recipe for repeated disasters for the Sunni and Shiite Moslems and the Kurdish people who actually live in Iraq. More recently the Russian Government and Google Maps agreed to label the Crimea as Russian territory for internet users in Russia. In countless ways a progress of lies is accepted as conventional wisdom. John the Baptist wasn’t interested in weather facts or foreign policy. He was calling into question the *progress of lies* which by his day had defiled Israel’s own religion and view of the world.

Like many ancient cultures, Israel claimed a special and direct relationship to a divine being. Israel believed the blood flowing in its racial stock was sacred. John the Baptist did not deny the unique authenticity of Israel’s covenant with the One True God. As a result of that covenant relationship, Israel had a genius for religion which was light years ahead of its contemporaries. But it was *precisely because* the relationship was true and authentic John’s ministry called into question the twists and turns of his own culture. John proclaimed it was *nonsense* to say a spiritual covenant could be turned into a racial, tribal, or legalistic tradition, and expect Almighty God to continue to support it. God would surely knock it down. John said, “The axe is laid to the root of the trees.”

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Any notions of blood superiority diverted souls away from the critical issues which lead to personal repentance and the pursuit of purity of life. John lampooned the notion that the Hebrew racial stock was in itself a holy link to divine preferential treatment. Putting it his way, John said, “God is able from these very stones to raise up children of Abraham.”

It is a mistake when we Catholics are pleased to think we are on the fast track to the Promised Land simply because we are riding on the right bus! Like the ancient Jews, this kind of mindset can distract us from the need for repentance and the pursuit of virtue. It is far better to think the Catholic Church exists for those who are not yet in it! And far better for their sake to concentrate on living a life of faithful witness and penance. We are to accept the discipline Almighty God has been pleased to give us in the community of faith. And being recipients of all the graces and benefits which Our Lord has bestowed upon us, is to *whet our appetite* for the duty of faithful discipleship.

No one can ever replace John the Baptist as the Lord’s forerunner. The Lord’s Kingdom has been planted on earth. But as ambassadors for Christ in our own day, you and I can borrow something from John’s operation manual. When it was prophesied of John he would “give knowledge of salvation to 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, John provided the means of enabling them to know Jesus as the source of salvation.

We can best bring others to Christ by the same means as John the Baptist: by 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. He was so convincing a messenger that he was called “the morning star” and “a burning and shining light.” In that light even the Pharisees “were willing for a season to rejoice.” (John 5:35)

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