

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius  
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Third Sunday of Advent  
December 13, 2020

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There are not many advantages to growing old. But one of them is my name is no longer in the *Rolodex* for jury duty! It seems the summons would invariably arrive in late November, and would coincide with the Advent season when we get to hear about John the Baptist. I remember the routine. You bring some reading material to keep you occupied in the jury pool room. And just about the time you are totally involved in your reading, in walks the judge to address the people. He reminds them of the importance of jurors and how they are to weigh the evidence.

On one occasion, after the judge had finished and departed, I did not immediately go back to my reading. I thought a bit about the importance of witnesses under oath, and how prosecutors and defense attorneys try to make witnesses appear to jurors in very different ways. I was reminded lawyers, like preachers, choose words carefully.

In Holy Scripture we are told John the Baptist was sent from God for testimony. John was primarily a witness, and under *Divine oath*. But even for a normal witness there are two parts to the job description. He is 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 he must be very clear in his testimony. A good witness does not prevaricate or waffle. If a witness is not sure about what he has seen or does not insist about it in what he testifies, his questioners will pick him apart. That often happens in the examination and cross-examination in a court case.

John the Baptist was immensely popular. His headquarters, down by the Jordan River, was the “go to” place to be seen. John was the toast of the town. With a bit of modern merchandising promotional skills, Jerusalem shops would have camel’s-hair tunics and recipes for locusts and honey! John’s popularity was increased because he did not ask much of people in terms of outward action. And he asked nothing for himself. Had he been a self-promoter, John could have started an ascetic community which might have been rival to the far more profound and far-reaching message of his cousin, Our Lord Jesus.

You and I can only imagine the degree of temptation suffered by John the Baptist. That is because we all know a bit about human nature. Ambition, and the desire to

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succeed and carve out your own niche, is never very far away. Yet for all his burning zeal, John only tried to get the majority of his hearers to lead decent lives.

And so when John's interrogators arrived and 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. A witness is not the doer. He is not the deed. He is not even the force behind the deed. As witness, John was the beholder of the light and the telling of it. In this way John was technically the last of the Old Testament prophets and not the first Christian evangelist. But John the Baptist *was* the first Christian witness.

You and I are called to be observers and then to give testimony. We do this principally by the conduct of our lives. Then secondly, by our words. Our work is 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 in the court of worldly opinion.

For most people Advent is nothing more than a hurried month of holiday preparations. But not this year! People are anxious. The Advent message is very contemporary. How do we attribute the happening of events? Those events in 2020 have included the Covid-19 pandemic, and such things as civil unrest, widespread hunger, lost jobs, evictions, and closed schools. In the 1<sup>st</sup> Century many in Israel 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. Advent asks what we think about the future. Our Lord Jesus is truly Lord of history. He knows the future better than you and I know either the past or the present. Long after the end of Advent 2020 you and I will be making our witness as we live and give Gospel answers to people in a world which seems to be falling apart all around us.