

Sermon: ADVENT 3, December 13th, 2015

In the Name...

I was recently asked what I thought was a profound theological question. What do John the Baptist and Winnie the Pooh have in common? Apparently, they share the same middle name.

Well, for the second week in a row the figure of John the Baptist holds our attention in this Advent Season. Last week, we focused on his public career, his preaching of repentance and preparation. This week, however, I'd like to focus on the character of the man himself.

It never ceases to amaze me how compact the Bible really is. For example, right at the beginning of the thing, tens of thousands of years of human observation of the natural order are combined with profound spiritual reflection to produce, in Genesis Chapter One, a description of why things are the way they are in just a few short lines. And in St. John's Gospel account, the two words "Jesus wept" tell us more about the character of God than a thousand scholarly volumes. So too, in the case of John the Baptist, we are given a positive wealth of information in just a few incidents and phrases, which tell us what John was like.

The first thing we see is that he was prepared to surrender his privacy in response to a call to public life. Remember, last week, after we heard read all the names of the rulers and important people of his world it said the Word of the Lord didn't come to any of them. Instead, it came to John.

Now John was a solitary in the wilderness, like a monk, a contemplative, minding his own business, doing his spiritual thing. He probably didn't want to start preaching to restless crowds, making himself a target for all kinds of comments and criticism. But, he did, because he was obedient to what God wanted him to do with his life. And so he preached and crowds gathered and people asked questions. And John was able to give counsel based on his years of spiritual journeying. He put his gifts at God's disposal.

Second, he constantly exhibited loyalty to the one who had called him. By worldly standards he was a success. He had thousands of followers, the religious leaders sought his advice; he was recorded by secular historians; and he had the power and influence, even after his arrest, to still intimidate Herod, the man who arrested him. But, he never let his success go to his head. He never tried to set himself up as someone important. All he said was that he was a voice - not even a person - just a voice crying in the wilderness. God was at the centre of his life and he was able to resist the temptation to egotism and vanity which destroy many a ministry.

And a third aspect of John's character may seem like a strange thing to call a virtue, but, it connects him with all of us and that is he was not afraid to doubt. It's easy for us to criticize the scribes and Pharisees and say that they didn't understand Jesus and his concept of Messiahship and that's true, but, neither did John.

You may have heard the story of the fellow who falls off a cliff and grabs hold of a tiny branch sticking out of the rocks. Clinging for dear life, he looks up to heaven and cries out, "God,

please help me." Suddenly, a voice from above booms out "Trust in me. Let go of the branch." The fellow looks down, then looks up again and cries out, "Uh, is there anybody else up there?"

This is illustrated in the incident when, after his arrest, John sends two of his closest disciples to confront Jesus and ask him plainly, "Are you or are you not the Messiah?" Things weren't going the way John envisioned and he was not afraid to question God. But, having done so, he accepted the answer he received and realized that Jesus was truly Messiah even if in a way he had not expected.

The great message of John was about preparing a way for the Lord. Every valley raised up, every hill made low, the crooked made straight and all mankind beholding the glory of God. John could preach this because he lived it. In his own life he brought down the mountain of pride and raised up the valley of humility. He smoothed the rough places of his heart and straightened every crooked inclination and so he beheld the glory of God.

The message and mission of John was wonderful, but, it was not unique. It is a message and mission handed on to each one of us who bear the name of "Christian", or "little Messiah", which is what the word "Christian" means.

Like John, we are to respond when God calls us, place our gifts at his disposal, and accept that we might have to be shaken out of our plans and routines. Like John, we need to keep God at the centre of our lives and resist the temptation to make too much of ourselves. Like John, we need to be honest with God, and not be afraid to question, but, having questioned, be ready to accept the answers even if they conflict with our opinions.

For we, too, are voices in the wilderness. A wilderness of selfishness, egotism, despair, fear, materialism, commercialism, and alienation. It is our voices which must say, "Prepare the way" and our lives which must exhibit it.

John the Baptist, you see, is a figure of history, of the past. But, we're here in the present. How the future plays out is going to be up to us.

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