

Rorate Coeli, the Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 24, 2017

Rev. David A. Kind
University Lutheran Chapel
at the Chapel of the Cross, Luther Seminary
St. Paul, Minnesota

+ Jesu juva +

ON HUMILITY BEFORE CHRIST

John 1:19-28

Grace, Mercy and Peace be unto you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The words of the prophet Isaiah, chanted as the antiphon to today's Introit, capture the Messianic hopes of the faithful, for the believing Jews all looked to the day when the skies would "pour down the righteous one," that is to the days when the Messiah would come to save Israel. Messianic hopes in the first century seem to have reached a fevered pitch, for there were others whom the Jews had thought might be the Christ. First there was Zerubbabel, the man of David's line who led the Israelites out of the Babylonian Exile and back to the land of Judah hundreds of years earlier. But Zerubbabel was not the Christ, just a human ruler, and not even a king.

But closer to Jesus' own time many Jews thought Simon of Peraea might be the Messiah, a man who at one time had been one of Herod's slaves but who led a revolt and proclaimed himself king. Concerning this Simon the great Jewish historian Josephus reports:

"[He was] a comely person, of a tall and robust body; he was one that was much superior to others of his order, and had had great things committed to his care. This man was elevated at the disorderly state of things, and was so bold as to put a diadem on his head, while a certain number of the people stood by him, and by them he was declared to be a king, and he thought himself more worthy of that dignity than any one else."

"He burnt down the royal palace at Jericho, and plundered what was left in it. He also set fire to many other of the king's houses in several places of the country, utterly destroyed them, and permitted those that were with him to take what was left in them for a prey. He would have done greater things, but care was taken to repress him immediately."

To make a longer story shorter, the commander of Herod's infantry called upon the Romans, who, in battle, decapitated Simon and killed his followers.

Around the same time, about 4 BC, another man, a shepherd named Athronges, was thought to be the Messiah. He also led a rebellion against one of the Herodians (Archelaus) and the Romans. Again Josephus reports for us:

“Together with his brothers, he slew a great many of both of Roman and of the king’s forces, and managed matters with the like hatred to each of them. They fell upon the king’s soldiers because of the licentious conduct they had been allowed under Herod’s government; and they fell upon the Romans, because of the injuries they had so lately received from them. But in process of time they grew more cruel to all sorts of men, nor could anyone escape from one or other of these seditions, since they slew some out of the hopes of gain, and others from a mere custom of slaying men.”

Eventually the Romans put this rebellion down too.

The rabbi Gamaliel’s words recorded in Acts 5 mention two more: Judas of Galilee and Theudas: “For some time ago Theudas rose up, claiming to be somebody. A number of men, about four hundred, joined him. He was slain, and all who obeyed him were scattered and came to nothing. After this man, Judas of Galilee rose up in the days of the census, and drew away many people after him. He also perished, and all who obeyed him were dispersed.”



How different John the Baptist is than these men. The Jewish leaders in Jerusalem send priests and Levites out to John and ask him: “Who are you?” For they most likely thought that here was another man claiming to be the Messiah, another charlatan who would rise up against the Romans and turn the world on its head; or, perhaps, on hearing of his preaching, they actually oped that he would be the Messiah. After all, John was of the pristly caste, a Levite of the line of Aaron, whose father Zecharias had served faithfully in the Temple as a priest. Perhaps this John really was what they were waiting for. But when they ask him he says straight off: “I am not the Christ.” Such humility! John had a following. He was well known. His preaching was powerful. He could easily have made himself a messiah figure and led a rebellion against the Romans too. But John had no interest in such things. He was a prophet, to be sure - the greatest among the prophets - but he was a faithful and humble prophet and knew his role.

they ask him again: “What then? Are you Elijah?” He answers that he is not (for although Jesus identifies him later as the promised Elijah, John is not Elijah reincarnated, but a prophet who acts in the spirit and power of Elijah, in other words, empowered and inspired by the Holy Spirit; and who fulfills the prophecy concerning the forerunner. They ask him: “Are you the Prophet?” And he says “no.” Exasperated, they say: “Who are you, that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?”

Here we see John's deep humility, the deep humility of faith before the real Christ whose way he had come to prepare. He does not claim a name for himself, he is not interested in growing his reputation as a leader or even as a preacher. "He said: 'I am "The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said.'" He is content to identify himself with his function, calling himself nothing more than "a voice." He is not the Word of God come down to earth; he is but a voice to proclaim the coming Word. He is not the source of divine revelation, but one sent to proclaim Divinity revealed in the person of the coming Messiah. He is not the one who will try to establish a kingdom, but has been sent to proclaim that "the Kingdom is at hand."

"And they asked him, saying, 'Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?' John answered them, saying, 'I baptize with water, but there stands One among you whom you do not know. It is He who, coming after me, is preferred before me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose.'" John did indeed baptize, and I am convinced that his baptism was a true baptism imparting the forgiveness of sins; but John was not the source of baptism's power to forgive. It was not he who created this sacrament. It was not his words that imparted to water the power to give new life. And it was not into him that people were baptized, but into Christ. The power of John's baptism was the power of another, of one who is source of the Holy Spirit's sending, who makes plain water into a life-giving, death-destroying, soul-cleansing bath. He, the Divine Christ, will arrive on the scene after John has prepared the way, but He is preferred before John, for John is but a man.

The Jews wondered if he were the Christ. But John makes it abundantly clear that he will not claim that role for himself. He is not the Bridegroom, but the friend of the Bridegroom. Hence he is not fit to untie the sandal of the Messiah. This comes from the book of Deuteronomy where if a man dies childless, his brother is to take the widow as his own wife and raise up a child in place of his brother, but if he refuses to perform the duty of husband, the elders remove the sandal from his foot and spit on him for refusing; then the woman passes to the next nearest relative. Gregory the Great explains what this means then when John says that he is not worthy to untie Christ's sandal: "How has Christ appeared among men, except as the Bridegroom of the Church? Of whom also the same John says, "He that has the Bride is the Bridegroom (John 3:29)." But as men believed that John was the Christ, which he denied, he rightly makes it plain, that he is unworthy to untie His shoes. As if he were openly to say, 'I am not worthy to uncover the feet of the Redeemer, and the title of Bridegroom, which is not mine, I shall not usurp.'"

Yes, what a difference between John and the false messiahs. And what a difference between the true Messiah and the false ones too! For they came promoting themselves, but Jesus comes in humility, making himself of no repute, born to an unwed virgin mother in an animal stall behind an inn that is either too full or unwilling to take them in. He comes not to lead his followers to rebellion against Rome, but to suffer and die at the hand of the Roman authorities. He comes not to

re-establish the sovereignty of the nation of Judah in this world, but to establish the kingdom of God which transcends this world. He comes not in might, but in humility; not to destroy men in his rise to power, but to lower Himself to save mankind from destruction.

And how, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, should you approach our Lord who came in such humility? Should you come in pride? Exalting yourself over one another? Concerned for your reputation? Concerned for your rights before God and one another? Or should you come in the humility of repentance, counting yourself, like John, unworthy of the one whose way He prepared? Yes, in repentance and humility we should come. For that will be true and right. For what are we in ourselves but poor, miserable sinners? And what are our works but cold and half-hearted, and tainted with our impurities?

And yet while we may claim nothing for ourselves, in Christ we may claim much! For He came in humility that we who ought to be humbled might by Him be exalted. He came to be poor that we might be made rich. He came as one with no place to lay his head that we might have prepared for us a heavenly abode. He came to suffer that we might be freed from the suffering due us on account of our sins. He came to die that we might live.

And He comes to us now, to feed us the fare of heaven and impart to us these heavenly gifts of forgiveness, life, salvation and heavenly blessing! Yes, here at Table is the true Christ, the long awaited Messiah! Heaven has indeed poured down the Righteous One to us. And the earth, that is the mortal virgin, has opened her womb and brought forth salvation! And now He who is both man and God invites us to Himself. For here is the Divine in His body and blood for us. We now have what the faithful Jews of old so longed for! We now know the Messiah and receive Him to ourselves. Let not the seeming humility of this sacred meal offend you, for Christ came in humility. And let no one else take glory for the gift imparted, for the power and grace of it is His alone. Now to Him who once humbled Himself for us and for our salvation be all worship, honor and glory, now and forever. Amen.

+ Soli Deo gloria +