

+ Jesu juva +

LOOK ONLY TO CHRIST

John 1:19-28, Philippians 4:4-7, Deuteronomy 18:15-19

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

John the Baptist must have seemed rather obstinate to the priests and pharisees sent by the Jewish leaders to investigate his activities. Their question, “Who are you?” seems rather straightforward. But in reality it was loaded with implications both religious and political. What was he really up to out there in the wilderness? Why was he attracting crowds of people? Was this yet another one claiming to be a messiah? Was he creating a new cult around himself? Would he upset the current order of things? Would he make trouble for the religious leaders? Would he make trouble with the Romans? Rather than answer their question about himself, John cuts right to the chase. “He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, ‘I am not the Christ.’”

This was not quite sufficient for the Jews who had been sent, so they press him:

“What then? Are you Elijah?”

“I am not.” “

“Are you the Prophet?”

“No.”

“Who are you, that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?”

“I am ‘The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said.”

John’s answers at last faithfully and clearly, but in a way that takes the attention off of who he is and what he is doing, and focuses it on the One whose way he prepares, the Lord who was now about to come among them. Indeed He had already been among them for some time, but not actively so. For it is not the birth of Christ He announces, but the beginning of His public ministry among them, which would lead to the fulfillment of His coming and of His Messianic work.

In other words, John’s apparent stubbornness in answering their questions tersely and without elaboration had a purpose. And this John does elaborate on when they continue to press John about his work. They ask him, “Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?” He does not answer that question at all, but rather points again away from himself to Jesus: “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." Yes, John was out there in the wilderness preaching repentance and baptizing people for the remission of sins, but it was not his baptism, per se, he was baptizing them into the One who stood among them. He was calling them to the coming Christ, and baptizing them into Christ Jesus.

John would not let either his person or his work rob Christ of that which belonged to Him alone. Jesus was the promised prophet who like Moses would speak the Word of God to the people. In the Exodus when God appeared among the people, they protested: "Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God, nor let me see this great fire anymore, lest I die." So the Lord would not come to them now in unveiled divinity, but rather as one of them, His glory veiled in humanity, His divinity joined to the flesh of a man from among their brethren, a man born to the line of Judah; a Jew like them, and yet Almighty God. This was not John. And John, the faithful voice sent before Him, would neither seek nor accept that which belonged to Jesus. He would not unstrap the sandal from his foot.

Now this unstrapping of the sandal had to do with the claiming of a bride in what is known as levirate marriage, where the widow of one's brother is to be taken as one's own wife in order to raise up children to the name of the dead brother. If one refused to do his duty the widow would publicly shame him by removing the sandal from his foot and spitting in his face and say, "So shall it be done to the man who will not build up his brother's house" (Deuteronomy 25:5-10). Now eventually this rite was tamed a bit, where the relative who did not want to take the woman as wife would remove his sandal and give it to another relative who would take her in and perform the required duty of the husband for her (Ruth 4:7-8). How, you may ask, does this apply to Jesus?

Jesus was the Bridegroom coming to claim a Bride, the Holy Church. The one who wears the sandal is the one who has the right to marry the bride! John did not have that right. John was sent to prepare the Bride for the marriage, to wash her and cleanse her of her sins. But she is meant for Christ alone and no other! And so the Baptists says a little later in the Gospel of John: "You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ,' but, 'I have been sent before Him.' He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease." When the Jews question John, saying, "Who are you?" It is Him who John confesses. It is Him whom John will not deny!

What was true for John is true for all of the faithful prophets and preachers of Christ. St. Ambrose says: "Moses was not the Bridegroom, for to him comes the word, 'Loose your shoe from off your foot,' that he might give place to his Lord. Nor was Joshua, the son of Nun, the Bridegroom, for to him also it was told, saying, 'Loose your shoe from off your foot,' lest, by reason of the likeness of his

name, he should be thought the spouse of the Church... Christ alone, then, is the Bridegroom to Whom the Church, His bride, comes from the nations, and gives herself in wedlock..."



The Church, the bride of Christ, should never be turned from her Bridegroom, especially by those ostensibly serving the Bridegroom. John, the greatest among those born of women according to Jesus, goes so far as to reduce his person to the function of a voice so that no one will be turned from Jesus to him. John did not want a cult to develop around himself (though one eventually did develop as we can glimpse from the book of Acts.)

And this is the common temptation against which all sent to proclaim Christ must guard. The messenger must not be the focus of people's faith, but rather the one the messenger is sent to proclaim. So we find St. Paul chastising the Corinthians: "each of you says, 'I am of Paul,' or 'I am of Apollos,' or 'I am of Cephas,' or 'I am of Christ.' Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?" And a little later: "Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed." Within a few centuries of these things a cult developed around the Blessed Virgin Mary, a cult which continues down to our own time, but would Mary herself encourage such a cult? No! Mary proclaims herself the lowly maidservant of the Lord. She does not want your votive candles and your prayers. She wants you to listen to her Son! And the saints, whose cults developed around the same time as the cult of the Blessed Virgin, what do they desire of you? They would reject your prayers and your acts of devotion at their tombs. Their lives were lived in faith to Christ, and point you to follow Jesus, to hear and receive Jesus!

And what of the preachers of today? If they are faithful they do not want to be at the center of a cult of personality. Oh it appeals to the ego! But that is the temptation, that they one give into the desire of ego and increase. But when that happens, Christ decreases. We rightly honor faithful preachers as such, not because of who they are, but because of their faithful service to Christ. This is why I quote men like

Ambrose and others. Not only were they more insightful than I am, but they did not proclaim themselves, but Christ. And what are all of us who have before and now hold the role of preacher? We are but voices directing you to Him who is preferred before us, for He was before us.

Even among the co-equal Persons of the Most Holy Trinity the Divine will points us to Jesus. Only three times in the Bible the Father speaks directly, and two of those times He does so expressly to identify who Jesus is and to direct us to hear Him. (The third time is also about Jesus and His bringing glory to God through His incarnation and through His Passion and resurrection.) When the disciple Philip asks Jesus to show them the Father, Jesus points Philip and us back to Himself: "Whoever has seen Me has seen the Father." And when describing the work of the Holy Spirit, Jesus says of Him: "But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me."

If God Himself directs you to the Person of Jesus alone, and is revealed in and by Jesus alone, then to whom should you be seeking? We are look only to Christ. We are to seek Him and hear Him. He is the promised Prophet. He is the Messiah and Savior. He is the one John as the new Elijah proclaimed, and the one that every faithful witness has preached.

At this time of year, as we draw near to the celebration of Christmas, there are lots of themes, lots of figures grasping at our attention. And it is not necessarily wrong to pay some attention to other figures. I think we all enjoy a little Santa Claus and listening to lighthearted Christmas music, decorating our houses, and spending time with friends and family and such. But we must not let our festivity go astray. We must not get so wrapped up in lights and presents that we loose sight of Him whose coming we await. Even churchly themes must keep their proper focus: Saint Nicholas, John the Baptist, the Blessed Virgin are good and useful to us; their stories are helpful; and it is good to emulate their faith. Yet each of these point us away from themselves to Christ. Even as we consider them anew each year, they must as individuals decrease as their confession of Christ must increase in our minds. And so as we rejoice in this season among so many good things, we are reminded by St. Paul, "Rejoice in the Lord always."

And so this voice also says to you. "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice! ...The Lord is at hand." Look to Him alone, seek not another, for there is no other who can bring you what He brings. Let us be obstinate in our confession, and confess and not deny that there is no one else worthy to take up His sandal. Yes let us make known Him who stands among us, even as we seek Him ourselves, hear His voice, receive His grace. For here among us stands the Bridegroom to bestow upon His Bride His love, to cleanse her with His absolution, to feast her with His flesh and His blood. Turn your hearts to Him who has come to save us, the promised Prophet and Messiah, Jesus Christ, the Bridegroom to whom belongs all glory and honor now and forever with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

+ Soli Deo gloria +