

Rorate Coeli, the Fourth Sunday of Advent
December 23, 2007

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Minneapolis, Minnesota

✧ Jesu juva ✧

JESUS AND JOHN

John 1:19-28

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

Last week we encountered St. John the Baptist in prison at the end of his ministry and near to the end of his life. This week we are taken back a few years to the prime of John's ministry when he is out on the other side of the Jordan River at a place known as Bethabara. And there he was active preaching repentance to all who would listen and baptizing those who heard him and believed.

He was, in short, acting very much like a prophet. And that grabbed the attention of the religious establishment back in Jerusalem. And so they send a number of priests and Levites (people of the priestly tribe who also served in the temple) to investigate him. They are interested in two things. First they want to know who he is. And so they simply ask him. And notice John's first answer. His main concern is not to declare who he is, but who he is not. "I am not the Christ," he says. That answer does not satisfy them, so they continue to ask "Are you Elijah? Are you the Prophet?" And when John tells them he is neither of those either they ask in what seems like exasperation: "Who are you, that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?" And to this John will only answer with regard to his role, the role prophesied for him in Isaiah, saying: "I am 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said."

The evangelist John tells us that they were sent to ask these questions by the Pharisees. The Pharisees were concerned about doctrine and teaching, this was the sect of the rabbis and the scribes who were very concerned about matters of faith and of the Scriptures. But once John has cryptically answered their question as to who he is, the priests and Levites get on to their second question, one having to do with something they were interested in, a question of rite and ceremony: "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" And in this question is a challenge concerning authority. By what right do you institute this ceremonial washing? The priests of the Temple and the Levites, were after all, the custodians of ceremonial and of the worship of God. And now John is out here in the wilderness, a full day's journey from Jerusalem washing people and promising them remission of sins. And so this is what the two questions are about: authority. The one question seeking to know who he is is about teaching authority. Do you claim God has sent you, is the point. And the second question about John's baptizing is about sacramental authority. If you are none of these people that others thought you might be, then on what basis do you institute a new washing, a new means of grace?

John, however, having adequately explained his office and role by quoting Isaiah's words concerning himself, is not interested in defending his own authority. He certainly had authority to do these things, authority from God who had called him from his mother's womb to be the prophet whose coming would herald the advent of the Messiah. But John is only concerned with that which God has sent him to do. He is concerned to point these priests and Levites, and the Pharisees who sent them too, beyond himself and to Christ.

Now let's take a closer look at the things John says concerning himself and Jesus, for these statements teach us something about who Jesus is in relationship to us and why He is come. John's first statement is: "I baptize with water, but there stands One among you whom you do not know." What does John mean by this? He is saying "you are all concerned about me and what I am doing, and well you might be, but I'm not the one at the center of all of this. There is another one here whom you do not know, but you must come to know Him, for He is the One sent by God the Father to save us. You do not know Him, because He comes as one of us. He looks no different than any other man. He's not glowing, has no halo floating over his head, no nimbus of glory around his body. As Isaiah says: "He has no form or comeliness; and when we see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him." You are looking at me, because I am dressed in camel hair and preaching repentance and baptizing with water, but I have come only to prepare His way. You should be looking for Him.

John continues: "It is He who, coming after me, is preferred before me..." Jesus comes after John in several ways. John precedes Jesus in conception and in birth, for he is conceived six months before the angel Gabriel appeared to a young Virgin living in Nazareth of Galilee by the name of Mary. And yet while John's conception and birth was miraculous, his father and mother being old, and his mother having been barren her whole life; Jesus birth surpasses John's. John's birth was miraculous, but Jesus more so. John is born to a barren woman. Jesus is born to a woman who has never been with a man, who remains a virgin after conception and birth. For while John's father was a priest of God named Zacharias, Jesus' father is God Himself. John's birth is astounding and wonderful. Jesus birth is salvific, for in His flesh heaven and earth are united.

John precedes Jesus in ministry. He becomes well known as a powerful preacher and messenger of God before Jesus even begins His public ministry. And yet Jesus' ministry surpasses John's in every way. John prepared the way for Jesus ministry by speaking of His coming and calling sinners to repentance. Jesus ministry brings the fullness of the Gospel to light. It is not only full of miracles, but His is a preaching that astounds everyone both its authority and grace. John the evangelist says of His ministry: "And of His fullness we have all received, and grace for grace. For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." When John preached and baptized, He did not do so on His own. When Jesus preaches and baptizes it is the word and action of God Himself, authoritative not as a prophetic work, though it is that too, but because it is God's work directly, Jesus being the Son of God.

John also precedes Jesus in death. And John's death, while a powerful witness to the truth (for he dies a martyr), does not save us or procure God's grace, or open the doors to heaven for us. Jesus' death does. Not only His death, but everything about Jesus from His conception to ascension is done for us and for our salvation. He is not just a messenger sent from God. He is the message itself. In Him we see God's love and grace in action and fulfilled. And He is God Himself, though incarnate as a man for the sake of our salvation.

Just last week we heard Jesus say about John the Baptist: "Assuredly I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist." But then He continues: "but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." John is the greatest among the sons of the men, but least in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus is reckoned among the least of the children of men, but is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. The Venerable Bede elaborates: "After me comes a man who was born in the world after me, who started to preach to the world after me, but who ranks ahead of me, since he excels me by the power of His majesty as much as the sun excels the morn-

ing star, though appearing after it. He was before me, because in the beginning was the word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... who ranks ahead of me [by] the primacy of His royal power, by which He presides over even the angels. Understand "because He was before me" in reference to the eternity of His divine majesty, by which He is equal to the Father..." (Homily 1.15 on the Gospels).

And then John adds this strange comment: "whose sandal strap I am not worthy to loose." This statement has puzzled a great many theologians and commentators over the centuries. Does this mean simply that John is as an unworthy servant when compared to Jesus? Or is there something more to it? Certainly John, because he, though a holy prophet of God, is still a sinful human being, is not of himself worthy to serve Christ in the least way. But I believe there is more to this cryptic little saying than that.

Various church fathers explain this in different ways. St. Gregory the Great says that this has to do with the mystery of the incarnation, that as Christ has taken on flesh and sandals are made from the dead flesh of animals, it is not within John's ability to untie this mystery, even though he recognizes it. St. Ambrose says that this has to do with the prophet in relationship to God. Moses was required to take off his sandals in the presence of God. Christ, being God, does not remove His sandals, nor does John have the right to remove them from Him. These are both helpful explanations, but the heart of it has to do with the rights of a bridegroom to his bride.

In the book of Ruth we see that when someone who was obliged to take a bride would not do so, that man took off his sandal and handed it to one who would do so. This is what was done when Boaz was handed a kinsman's sandal and thereby acquired Ruth as his wife.

John is here again saying that he is not the Messiah. He is not the bridegroom and has no right to take his place. He cannot take that honor from Christ by taking the sandal from His foot. And later when John's disciples complain that Jesus' ministry is outshining his own, he tells them: "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." (John 3:28-30). And so John would not untie Jesus' sandal and claim His place. He was the forerunner, the messenger, the "voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'" But Jesus is the Lord and the Bridegroom of His Church.

And as Boaz rescued Ruth and took her to be His bride, so Christ has rescued us. John could not save us. He was the herald of salvation, and though a great and holy saint, also still sinful. Jesus comes as our salvation, appears on earth as one of us to unite heaven and earth in righteousness; and to call you to be among the people of His Bride, where He dispenses all of His grace and goodness to her, through the giving of His Word, and through the nourishing feast of His flesh and blood. There stands One among us now, as He stood among John's flock on that day so long ago, and He stands here to bless you with these gifts of heavenly grace.

And receiving these with faith, we are now bone of His bone and flesh of His flesh. And though we are not worthy of these things anymore than John was, on account of our sins, Christ has chosen us and made us worthy. And His Word makes it so. And so this day listen to the message of John, do not look for another, do not honor prophets more than the Lord, but seek Christ who is your salvation, the Bridegroom of His Church, the Man who is the Divine Son of God. Amen.

✧ Soli Deo gloria ✧