

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT—Year C

Every year on the Second Sunday of Advent, whether the Gospel reading is from Matthew, Mark, or Luke, we hear of John the Baptist receiving the word of God in the desert and preparing the way of the Lord by proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. In Christian art, John is regularly portrayed as a rather daunting figure, something of a wildman, dressed in rough garments such as befit someone who addresses in threatening words many of those coming to him. If our Lectionary passage had gone on for just one more verse we would have heard some of those words: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce good fruits as evidence of your repentance.” Not exactly the sort of person we might want to approach when receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation!

However, there is another trait of this saint that we would normally find more appealing, namely, his humility. This is, after all, the man who also said: “One mightier than I is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop and loosen the thongs of his sandals,” even as he also said: “He must increase. I must decrease.” We might even go so far as to say that John the Baptist is one of the Bible’s most preeminent exemplars of humility, which a Benedictine bishop back in the nineteenth century called “the groundwork of all the Christian virtues.” Now, as St. Teresa of Avila once said, humility is really equivalent to truth, an honest recognition of who we truly are in the sight of God.

Still, even among Christian authors who clearly recognize that in comparison with God’s goodness and power we are only beggars, the *tone* with which they express this insight varies greatly. In the monastic rule according to which I live, St. Benedict writes in his chapter on humility that “the seventh step of humility is that a person not only admits with his tongue but is

also convinced in his heart that he is inferior to all and of less value, humbling himself and saying with the psalmist, 'I am truly a worm, not a man, scorned by men and despised by the people.'"

How different is something written much more recently by another monk, Thomas Merton, who certainly knew Benedict's Rule inside out but did not follow that saint's tone in one of his most celebrated passages, the one describing how he came to abandon the spurious attitude of monastic elitism and separatism that had characterized much of his thought up until that day in 1958 on a street corner in Louisville, when he came to understand how much he had in common with everyone else and how much he loved them. In his own well-known words:

Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of [the] hearts [of all these people,] where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes.... At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God.... It is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely.

Can these two understandings of the human person be reconciled? Is there any way in which we can be said to be a worm, despised and despicable, feeling ourselves to be inferior to everyone else, and yet acknowledge that we have within ourselves a point untouched by sin and illusion? A simple solution might be to note that whatever goodness and beauty are in us is entirely from God, without whom we are nothing. Moreover, great saints are often so aware of

God's immense holiness that they feel themselves to be the greatest of sinners, far worse than the most unrepentant criminal on death row. All this would surely pass muster in the light of traditional theology and is understandable enough psychologically. However, I want to suggest that it would be still more humble not even to compare oneself with others, to try to calculate where one stands in comparison with one's friends, relatives, or colleagues. I know some people who are almost plagued with the felt need to know how they stand spiritually in relation to someone else, but that is such a waste of time. An older spiritual writer once put it very well when he wrote: "Humility has nothing to do with self-depreciation. It is not thinking little of oneself, it is rather not thinking of oneself at all. As long as we can feel humiliated, we are not perfectly humble." That is, indeed, a tall order, but with God's grace such an attitude is certainly possible. One useful way to move in this direction is to follow the advice of the Letter to the Hebrews: to keep our eyes fixed not on ourselves but on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of our faith (Heb. 12:2). This is exactly what great art regularly shows John the Baptist doing: pointing to Jesus, pointing away from himself. If we follow his example, we need not call ourselves either worms or living saints. To be called a Christian, one who really wants to be a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ, is all the self-designation we need.