

With John the Baptist, we are all inclined to be humanly impatient with the ways of God. During Advent we acknowledge Christ's coming at Bethlehem in time, we live his coming daily in Word and Sacrament, and we await His final coming in the New Creation. This is what Christmas is all about--the Word made flesh, the Divine made known in human terms as we await the costly uncoiling of life that has become curled in upon itself.

Let us pray:

Bring us, O Lord God, at our last awakening
into the house and gate of heaven,
to enter into the house,
where there shall be no darkness nor dazzling,
but one equal light;
no noise nor silence, but one equal music;
no fears nor hopes, but one equal possession;
no ends nor beginnings, but one equal eternity;
in the habitations of Your majesty and glory,
without end. Amen.

John Dunne

God, the Father, spoke the word into the first darkness before the coming of the light. And in time, He sent Saint John the Baptist to prepare His people for the coming of the Messiah.

Fr. Abbot, Brother Monks, and Friends of St. Anselm's:

For two weeks now, John the Baptist has played a central role in our Advent Liturgy. In today's Gospel, Jesus tells us that "among those born of women there has been none greater than the John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." Saint Augustine of Hippo wrote: "*O great and admirable mystery! He must increase, but I must decrease, said John, said the voice in the wilderness which personified all the voices that had gone before announcing the Father's Word Incarnate in His Christ.*"

We have heard this theme before. John is not the light. He is not Elijah. He is not the Christ. He is just a voice crying in the wilderness. He is not worthy to unstrap Jesus' sandals. He is the last of the Old Testament Prophets and the first of the New Testament Prophets. His is the voice of Advent.

John, it seems, has been inserted as a kind of boundary between the two Testaments. That John is a boundary is a **new** way of understanding his role. The Lord Himself indicates this when He says, "*The Law and the prophets were **until** John.*" So John represents the old but heralds the new. Because he represents the old, he is born of an elderly couple, Zachary and Elizabeth; because he represents the **new**, he is revealed as a prophet even before his birth—when Mary arrived at Elizabeth's house, John leapt in his mother's womb. Already he had been marked out, designated before he was born; and it was already shown whose forerunner John would be, even before he saw Christ at the Jordan. These are divine matters and exceed the measure of human frailty—being conceived in Elizabeth, a woman beyond the years of childbearing, John is born. And when he receives the name John, his father's tongue is loosed. What are we being told here? How do we explain this mystery?

Not believing the Angel Gabriel, Zachary is struck dumb and loses his voice, until John, the Lord's forerunner, is born and releases his voice for him. Perhaps there is another meaning to Zachary's silence. Losing his voice was puzzling and obscure to those around him. With Christ's proclamation—"none greater than John"—this mystery was beginning to be revealed, no longer shut up. Voice is released and opened up by John's arrival; the purpose becomes even clearer when the Christ who was prophesied in the Old Testament is proclaimed by John's preaching **voice** in the desert. The releasing of Zachary's voice at the birth of John has the same significance as the tearing of the veil of the Temple at the crucifixion of this same Christ. If John were meant to proclaim himself, he would not be opening Zachary's mouth. The tongue is released because a **voice** is being born—for when John was heralding the Christ, he was asked, "*Who are you?*" And he replied, "*I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness.*" John is the voice, but the Christ is the **Word**. John is a voice in time, but Christ is the Word before time, eternal from the beginning, and forever.

So why is John the Baptist so important during Advent? Here is what I think the reason is. John doesn't just repeat Old Testament prophecies. He says **new** things, and **new** emotions are expressed. John the Baptist is brought in right here on this 3rd Sunday of Advent because he represents a kind of response to what Jesus is: "I must decrease and He must increase." John has an abounding joy over himself getting smaller and Jesus getting bigger. John has humbled himself and exalted Christ. Thus at Christ's baptism in the Jordan a heavenly voice is heard: "This is my Son, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased."

It should be remembered that the feast of Saint John the Baptist is celebrated shortly after June 21st, the Summer Solstice. For John must decrease as the sunlit hours daily become fewer, so that Christ can increase, bringing the Light of the World to our fallen human race by His birth. Christ's birth takes place shortly after December 21st, the Winter Solstice, as the sunlit hours once again begin to increase. This idea is captured in the Magnificat antiphon for Vespers on December 21st, "*O Sol Justitiae*," which reads: "*O Rising Dawn, Radiance of Eternal Light, and Sun of Justice, Come and enlighten those that sit in darkness, and in the shadow of death.*"

The monastic tradition (as found within the Western Church) has always tried to incorporate every aspect of our earthly and daily lives into our liturgies—light and darkness, birth and death, processions and cyclic rituals, even the changing of the seasons have a metaphorical influence upon the liturgical year. The Church in her traditional monastic liturgies is all-encompassing, using all things to help teach her children about the mysteries of our faith. Saint John as a voice in the wilderness outshines all other prophets, and he excels the virtues of all other patriarchs in apostolic authority, and by his beheading, John supersedes in the honors of his virtue the glory of all other martyrs of God. Thus as Isaiah says—the eyes of the blind must see, the ears of the deaf must be cleared, the tongue of the mute must sing.

So who are the voices for the Church today? The teachings of Pope Francis are voices, the apostles are voices, the martyrs are voices, and Saint Benedict and Saint Anselm are voices. Voices too are the psalms, voices are the Gospels. And through all these voices, let the **Word** come forth; the Word who is in the beginning; the Word who is with God, the Word who is God. The voice of ***one crying in the wilderness*** must wane as the Word increases. To John then, we must liken our lives, making them over, so that we too may decrease and wane in importance as Christ waxes forth in this Advent Season. Christ must increase in importance as we prepare for His coming.

By sending His only Son, incarnate by the Spirit of Love in the fullness of time, the Father has revealed His innermost secret: God Himself is an eternal exchange of love, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Advent reflects both the human side of the Incarnation, the very human heart of the new Adam born at Bethlehem, and on the divine side, the Incarnate Heart that will be pierced by the lance on the Cross. This same human and divine Heart absorbs our longing for redemption, our sense of being a new chosen people, our fundamental love of our Lord as our greatest friend and our only Savior. The birth of Jesus conveys to us an instinct for splendor and a feeling of security amidst the precariousness of life.

Thus as Christians, and we as monks, need the closest possible union with Jesus, as if we were spending our whole lives before this tabernacle. We must think of ourselves as living solely for Christ in our daily lives, as Saint Benedict says in his **Rule**: "Prefer nothing to Christ." And we must bring His saving Heart to all those people God continually sends into our lives. As monks, we have a unique occupation: to dwell in the house of God, to be free of the distractions of the world and to keep inner silence before the tabernacle of the Most High. Yet the truly strong Christians are not the monks of the cloister but the faithful in the world who can carry the contemplative stillness and prayer into the marketplace, into their daily work. This is why in centuries past, monastic liturgies brought Christ to the people in their common work, to their fields of harvest, to their regular crafts, to their daily prayer. So that **the least in the kingdom of heaven** could be greater than John the Baptist.

In such arduous and terrifying times that we live in, it is hard to bring the all-encompassing Advent of Christ, His holy human Body, His Sacred Heart, His Divine Word of healing Light into our darkened, troubled world of terrorism, suicide bombers, shootings in our schools, religious and ethnic wars. An American theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, wrote that the doctrine of sin is the only Christian belief directly verifiable by observation. Just look around you at the world, or within the depths of your own heart, and you will see what it is all about. It is hard to find the right vehicles to convey Christ to our fallen race so dominated by an amoral stance of self-righteousness, over-consumption, world poverty and hunger, military preemption, and superpower ascendancy.

During Advent, we try to come to grips with our Catholic faith and human reason. Essentially for Saint Anselm, during [life there is a continuous battle between faith and understanding in which each feeds upon the other, drawing sustenance from each other and perhaps destroying one another as seen in professed agnostics and atheists.](#) And so on this 3rd Sunday of Advent, as Saint Benedict would admonish, **we must begin again.**