



Third Sunday of Advent December 11, 2016 A

JOHN THE BAPTIST'S CRISIS OF FAITH AND ITS APPLICATION TO OUR LIVES ON FOUR LEVELS

Last weekend, we encountered John out in the desert preaching a strong message of repentance. John is a no nonsense guy. Either he's with you or against you. He pulls no punches. He has no stomach for compromise. For the Baptist, things are either good or bad. John the Baptist can easily be the patron saint of all who take a black-and-white approach to religion. It seems he fully expects the coming Messiah to be like him, a fiery preacher who will bring God's judgment to the earth, whence the wheat will be separated from the chaff, and the chaff will burn in an unquenchable fire.

Today, we encounter John in prison because he spoke 'truth to power' by condemning King Herod for marrying his brother's wife. While in prison, he hears about the ministry of Jesus from his disciples which confounds him. Jesus does not seem to live up to John's expectations of what the Messiah will be like. Jesus is not doing what John spoke about in last week's Gospel. He is not laying his 'axe to the root'; he is not being 'the wrath that is to come'; he is not 'burning up sinners.' Instead, he is granting mercy and healing to the sinner and broken-hearted. John preaches judgment, Jesus preaches mercy. John must wonder: "What's up with this Jesus guy? Did I get it all wrong about the Messiah and who he will be like?"

The manner in which Jesus' ministry is unfolding causes John, now in prison, to have a real crisis of faith. What is John to do? How is he to react or respond to Jesus? What should he tell his loyal disciples about this Jesus fellow who is not fulfilling his expectations of what the Messiah will be like? John has some options:

- he could reject Jesus as a fake Messiah and tell his followers to do the same;
- he could keep his doubts to himself and ignore his concerns; or
- he could confront the issue directly through his faithful disciples who visit him in prison.

John chooses the third option. He sends his disciples to Jesus to ask him: "*Are you the one who is to come or should we look for another?*" Since John appears to be a 'straight arrow' type of guy, he probably expects or assumes that he will receive a straight 'yes' or 'no' to his question.

But instead of a downright response, Jesus points to what he is doing—to his works. "*Go and tell John what I am doing. I am healing the blind and the deaf; the lame are walking and lepers are being cleansed.*" By responding this way, Jesus makes known to John what Isaiah the prophet said the Messiah would be about (35:1-6, 29:18-19, 61:1-2). Jesus is revealing to John that the Isaian messianic visions and prophecies are realized and fulfilled in him.

How would John react to what his disciples report back to him? Jesus' response clearly suggests that John needs to rethink his whole Messianic vision. How big of a struggle will it be for John to let go of his mindset? It is ironic that the one chosen by God to prepare others to receive the Messiah, the one chosen to call others to conversion of heart, now himself has to undergo his own conversion—a sort of intellectual conversion.

Application to our lives

This Gospel has application to our lives on several levels. I will name a few. Other applications may come to you.

God level

In today's Gospel, John is being challenged to let go of his perception of the Messiah and to change his mindset.

We too sometimes have to let go of a particular mindset or image we have about God and his ways. In Isaiah 55, God says to us, "*My thoughts are not your thoughts and my ways are not your ways.*" We may have been raised to believe that if we say our prayers, keep the commandments and try to be a good person, God will protect us from bad things. Then something bad happens to us or to someone very close to us, and we pray hard for God to fix the problem but God does not fix the problem the way we want him to. What now? In our disappointment, we may quit relating to God or we may even stop believing in God. Recently, we heard about Mother Teresa's spiritual crisis. She obviously chose to remain faithful to God even though he hid his face from her for many years.

If we experience a spiritual crisis due to the way God seems to be handling our lives, we can be certain that the devil will want to use this crisis to cause us to abandon God or to distance ourselves from God so that our belief in him will have little or no impact on how we lead our lives.

Church level

Catholics raised in the pre-Vatican II Church (prior to 1964) imaged the Church in a particular way: stable and unchanging. It was the last bastion of stability in an ever-changing world. Then came Vatican II and everything about our Church seemed to change. Catholics are being challenged to embrace a church that is not static, that is dynamic and always growing and developing. Core doctrines remain the same, but we receive *fresh insights* into old doctrines and we *express* those doctrines in new ways. For example, we still have seven sacraments but the *way we celebrate* them has changed a lot. While most Catholics are able to move with this work of the Holy Spirit—who blows where he wills—some Catholics are unable to embrace a church that is growing and developing in her own self-understanding. For example, on Wickham Road, north of Parkway, is the *Holy Family Roman Catholic Church*, which rejected Vatican II.

Even though they call themselves Catholic, they are not in union with our diocese and with Rome.

Moral level

As children, we were raised to believe in a set of core Catholic beliefs, e.g., a church founded by Christ, the seven sacraments, the presence of Christ in the bread and wine at Mass, that missing Mass is a serious sin as is sex outside of marriage.

Then we grow up, maybe go to college and meet people who challenge our beliefs, and upon reflection we feel that the core beliefs we grew up with do not make sense any more. We may start to wonder if:

- Jesus is really divine
- Jesus is truly present in the bread and wine at Mass
- it is a serious sin to miss Mass on Sunday
- it is a serious sin to engage in premarital sex.

All of these doubts may bring about a crisis of conscience or a crisis of faith for us. What do we do now? Some options:

- We can substitute our own set of beliefs for those of the Church. This is sometimes called 'my truth.' Pope Benedict calls it 'moral relativism.' In this vision of belief, there are no absolutes. Everything is dependent on each person's individual conscience and how he/she sees or experiences reality.
- We ignore our crisis by distancing ourselves from God, Church and prayer. Or we may still go to Church even though we feel that it has become very rote and has little or no impact on the way we live our lives.
- Our crisis of faith may motivate us to go on a whole new journey of reading, research, retreats, and conversations with clergy and other informed Catholics. The end result could be a change in our understanding of the faith which draws us closer to the Church. It is truly a blessing when this happens. But there is also the possibility that our journey could lead us to join another Christian church or even a non-Christian religion.

Relationship level/midlife crisis level

Most marriages or relationships sooner or later experience a crisis point of one kind or another. One or both spouses may wonder if they want to remain married. Some people reach a midlife crisis when they have a strong desire to go off and ‘find themselves.’

Often, as all of this is happening, people also experience a spiritual or religious crisis when they find themselves questioning many beliefs they grew up with. Obviously, such a time is vitally important and critical in a person’s life. (The Chinese word for *crisis* has a double translation: *danger* and *opportunity*.) In a time of crisis, the *danger* is at least twofold. We may go a bit crazy and leave a basically good relationship or abandon a good set of beliefs. Or we may choose to stick our heads in the sand and ignore thoughts and feelings that could lead us to a new and better place in life.

The *opportunity* is that crisis, properly managed, can and will most likely lead to tremendous growth in our lives on many levels. For example, a crisis in marriage may lead one or both spouses to:

- care a lot more about their physical health.
- lead them to go on a marriage encounter weekend or seek out marriage counseling.
- lead one or both to explore their faith in a new and fresh way.
- lead them to toss out childish and immature understanding of religious beliefs and practices, as well as unrealistic expectations about marriage.
- choose to end the marriage which has been emotionally dead for a long time. Such a choice is understandable particularly when one spouse has no desire to do anything to resurrect the relationship.

The choice is ours, and it is a very important choice. The decision we make in a time of crisis may have huge consequences in our lives and in the lives of those close to us.

Reflection questions:

1. What speaks to you most in this column?
2. Have you ever had one or more of the above crises? If so, how did you handle it? What were the consequences of the course of action that you chose?

Have a blessed week,

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