



John the Baptist's Crisis of Faith and its Application to our Lives on a God, Church, Moral and Relationship Level.

Last weekend we encountered John out in the desert preaching a strong message of repentance. John was a no nonsense guy. Either you were with him or against him. He pulled no punches. He had no stomach for compromise. For the Baptist, things were either good or bad. John the Baptist could easily be the patron saint of all who like a black and white approach to religion. It seems he fully expected the coming Messiah to be a bit like himself, a fiery preacher who would bring God's judgment to the earth. The wheat would be separated from the chaff and the latter would burn in an unquenchable fire.

Today we encounter John in prison because he spoke the truth about power—he condemned King Herod for marrying his brother's wife. While in prison he hears about the ministry of Jesus from his disciples. John is confused by what he hears. Jesus is not living up to John's expectations of what the Messiah would be like. Jesus is not doing what John spoke about last week. He is not laying his axe to the root, he is not being 'the wrath that was to come', he is not burning up sinners. Instead he is issuing mercy and healing to the sinner and broken hearted. John preached judgment, Jesus is preaching mercy. John must have wondered: "What is up with this Jesus guy? Did I get it all wrong about the Messiah?"

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

- He could have rejected Jesus as a fake Messiah and told his followers to do the same.
- He could have kept his doubts to himself and ignored the issue.
- Or he could confront the issue directly through his faithful disciples who visited him in prison.

John chose the third option. He sent his disciples to Jesus and asked him: "Are you the one that is to come or should we look for another?" Since John seemed to be a 'straight arrow' type of guy he probably expected or assumed that he would receive a 'yes' or 'no' answer to his question.

Instead of giving John's disciples a straight answer, Jesus points them to what he is doing, points them 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." In responding like this, Jesus is saying to John

these are the things that Isaiah the prophet said that the Messiah would be about (35:1-6, 29:18-19, 61:1-2). Jesus is saying to John that the Isaian messianic visions and prophecies *are* realized and fulfilled in him.

When John's disciples delivered to him Jesus' response to his question, one wonders how he dealt with it. Jesus' response did mean that John had to rethink his whole Messianic vision. How big of a struggle was it for John to let go of one mindset and replace it with a whole other one? 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 had 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 a particular mindset that he had about the Messiah and replace it with a new mindset.

Sometimes we may also have to let go of a particular mindset or image we have about God and his ways. In Isaiah 55, God says to us "that 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. In response to the bad thing we pray hard for God to fix the problem. God fails to fix the problem at least in the way we wanted him to do so. 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 choose 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 the crisis to cause us to abandon our belief in God or to at least distance ourselves from God in such a way that our belief in him has little or no impact on how we lead our lives. God is more or less absent from our lives.

Church Level

Catholics raised in a pre-Vatican II church 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 were being challenged to embrace a church that was not static, for a church that was dynamic and always growing and developing. Core doctrines remained the same, but we received *fresh insights* into old doctrines and we *expressed* the doctrines in new ways. For example, we still had seven sacraments, but the *way we celebrate* the sacraments changed drastically.

While most Catholics were able to move with this work of the Holy Spirit, who blows where he wills, some Catholics were unable to embrace a church that grows and develops in her own self-understanding. More recently the clergy sex abuse crisis and the cover-up by our bishops led to a big crisis of faith for many Catholics. I assume this crisis caused many Catholics to jump ship. Most stayed because they were able to differentiate between the church and its imperfect leaders.

Moral Level

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

Then we grew up and maybe went to college, people may have challenged our beliefs or they just did not make sense to us anymore. We may have started to wonder.

- If Jesus was really divine
- If Jesus was truly present in the bread and wine at Mass.
- If it was a serious sin to miss Mass on Sundays
- If it was a serious sin to engage premarital sex especially with someone you loved.

All of these doubts may have brought 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. Sometimes this is called ‘my truth’. Pope Benedict has called this moral relativism. In this vision of belief there are no absolutes. Everything is dependent on each individual conscience and how he/she sees or experiences reality.
- We ignore our crisis by distancing ourselves from God and prayer. Or we may still go to church but 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 may be the movement from a childish understanding of our faith to a much more adult and mature understanding of our faith. It is truly a blessing when this happens. Of course, a less desirable outcome is that our study may 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 be married anymore or married to their current spouse. Other men or women have a midlife crisis when they have a strong desire to go off and ‘find themselves’. Often as all of this is happening, people also have a spiritual or religious crisis—questioning many beliefs they were raised 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 end up leading us to a new and better place in life.

The *opportunity* is that the 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 tossing out a childish and immature understanding of religious beliefs and practices and unrealistic expectations about marriage.
- One or both spouses may choose to end a marriage that has been emotionally dead for several years - one especially understands such a choice when one spouse has no desire to do anything to resurrect the relationship.

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

Reflection Questions

- 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 choose?

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Have a blessed week,

