

## **A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Advent, December 21, 2008**

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John “confessed, and denied not, but confessed, I am not the Christ” (from the gospel, John 1:19f.)

In Advent, we read prophecies that point to Jesus, but we also read prophecies that tell us about John the Baptist. Isaiah (40:1f.) and Malachi (3:1) speak of a person who will come before the Messiah. Jesus said this person was John (Matthew 11:10).

Jesus spoke in glowing terms about John, saying “Among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist” (Matthew 11:11). So well respected was John that the leadership was afraid to say anything bad about him, lest they lose popular support (Matthew 21:25).

However, in today’s gospel (John 1:19f.) when John was asked who he was, John was adamant in saying that he was not the Messiah, but had only been sent to introduce the Messiah. The Messiah was so much more important that John said he was not worthy to take off the Messiah’s shoes.

That is to say, John knew who he was: A genuine prophet with significant gifts, whose job it was to point to another. This is a pattern for the Christian life. Each of us is given, along with the gift of the Holy Spirit, our own unique gifts and ministry. None of us was born in fulfillment of prophecy; nonetheless, each of us is known by God and called by him to service.

We believe that God has intimate and personal knowledge of each of us. As Psalm 139 says, “You created my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb” (139:12). We believe that God has called each of us personally to be a follower of Jesus. We are part of God’s chosen people.

Being chosen by God leads to humility, for the emphasis remains on the One who chooses. The one chosen must, by definition, point in thanksgiving to the Chooser. Should we ever forget that we are not the One, but are called to serve and bear witness to the One, we develop a false sense of importance.

We see this false sense of importance frequently in the world in the star or celebrity who believes that the game, the show or the creative genius is all about him. When messengers are sent to ask this type of person what he says of himself, the answer, frequently, is, “I am the man!”

When we achieve some success in the world and rise above others in position or honor, we are tempted to say, “Look at me. Look at what I’ve done. Look at what I can do. Look at who I am.” This self assessment lacks an essential point of reference—God.

When we bring God into the picture, the perspective changes. We recognize that he is eternal and we are temporary. We recognize that he is big and we are small. We recognize that the gifts and circumstances that have allowed us to do well all come from him. As 1 Corinthians 4:7 says, “What have you that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?”

Bringing God into the picture eliminates pride and produces humility, thanksgiving and generosity. Any claim or attempt to be more or less than God intends us to be is false. If John the Baptist had

attempted to be the Messiah, his quest would have failed. Likewise, if John had tried to escape his vocation of being the greatest prophet before Christ, the attempted escape would have failed also. See the story of Jonah.

There can also be a false sense of humility. Each of us has intrinsic value because we are made and born again in the image of God. God calls each of us to serve him with the gifts he has given us. Any idea that “I am a valueless and unimportant person” is just as false as the idea that “I am the man.”

False humility is really just another form of pride. For it, too, uses *my* system of valuation instead of the one established by God.

Since God is the source, sustainer and end of all things, the true meaning and value of everything will only be found in its relationship to God. Part of the creative glory of God is that he shows his glory in unique and diverse ways through the creation. The role of the creation, and each creature, is to reflect fully the glory it has been given.

When a part of the creation ceases to reflect God’s glory, and, instead, claims that it is something in and of itself, that very confession means that it has ceased to be anything at all. As St. Paul writes, “If any one thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself” (Galatians 6:3).

The word *repent* means to have a change of mind. It means more than merely the idea that we should stop doing bad things and start doing good things. It means that we should start realizing who we are in God’s will and plan and act accordingly—and stop pretending we can be anything else.

John said, “I am the voice of one crying, in the wilderness, prepare ye the way of the Lord.” John also said, “I am not the Messiah.”

None of us is the Messiah either. But each of us is a member of Christ, the child of God and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven (BCP 577). Our vocation, like John, is to use our gifts to point to the One who is coming, whose shoe’s latchet we are not worthy to unloose.

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