

Advent 4, 2016

The Christmas Divide

John 1:19-23

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Today's gospel begins with a major confrontation concerning who John the Baptist is. This is a very edifying moment for our Baptist. He could have soaked up the glory that was coming his way and bask in his growing fame. How many of us have been tempted to accept praise when it comes our way, even if it is not fully ours? But, John has an understanding concerning who Jesus is that no one else is aware of...his excitement is not to glorify himself but to point the world to the Savior of mankind! And this is no easy task...the obscurity of the messiah has been hid in mystery, out of any tangible experience, except for maybe a small, closely knit group. God has been covered in a glory of light preventing his creation from a closer look. But all has changed, the first advent is upon us and God Almighty is about to expose His salvific presence in the form of a babe named Jesus who will reveal his divinity to the world...and the human tool he will use...is John the Baptist!

John's confrontation is a fantastic dramatization of human longing verses human persuasion. Longing always exhibits a desire for something good, something pleasing or something that will bring comfort. It is this longing that brings the Jews to seek this crazy Baptist who lives in the wild. They come seeking closure that the long awaited messiah has come. They know the scriptures and they are watching the signs of the time. But, the revealing of the Messiah will not come about without its opponents. There is a force of ill-gotten persuasions coming from the Pharisees wanting only to cast doubt and eliminate this Jewish yearning.

There is a difference in the way John's two critics come to him. For the Jews it was in their constant focus on the coming of a Messiah, a King of peace who would lead them. The Jews come with an honest inquiry, *Who art thou...Art thou Elias...Art thou that prophet...who art thou...What sayest thou of thyself?* They truly want to know who this man is! Is he the one they are looking for? There is something special going on...if

only they could get some answers. But John only confesses that he is not whom they seek, *I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness. Make straight the way of the Lord.*” Here John is echoing familiar and comforting words, words which the Jews would recognize from Isaiah, *“Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the Lord’s hand double for all her sins. The voice of him, that crieth in the wilderness, prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God”* (Isaiah 40:1-3).

The Jews know something is at hand and you can only imagine what must be going through their minds as the Pharisees step up to put a bad light on John’s conversation with the Jews. *“...why baptize thou then, if thou be not that Christ, nor Elias, neither that prophet?”* Are they trying to cast doubt on the gospel message? Are they fearful that John’s following will jeopardize their own positions of power? In any event, they are trying to cloud the issue and invalidate John’s ministry. Sound familiar? Even today, and especially in this advent season as we look to last things, as we witness the signs of our time, we see all around us those who are trying desperately to discourage Christian rights. Take down the commandments; we don’t want to be reminded not to steal or commit adultery. Take those bibles out of the motel nightstands; I might get offended if I am tempted to open one. Take that crèche out of your store front, who wants to be reminded what Christmas really means...and no Christian depictions on your lockers this Christmas kids; there might be one person who disagrees with the majority.

Why would the arrival of a tiny baby, who would grow up bearing the message of love...create so much upheaval? We must remember that, although Jesus comes as a babe, he will be King over the entire world. There are those who defy that message...they want to be the rulers of nations, they want to be the rulers of cities, they want to be the rulers of their own homes and they want to answer to no one. The Pharisees were attacking that which could be seen as a threat to their way of life and this divide between Christians and the secular world continues in our own time as we stand at the waters edge, looking for the signs of our time, asking the questions; how bad does it have to get? When will our

peace come? Is the Second Advent upon us? Are we overlooking the obvious presence of Christ in our midst?

There is an obvious Christmas divide permeating our society between those who look to Christ and those who close their eyes and turn away. Christian love surrounds this season. Advent seems to be the season in which Christians shine best. Our compassion is raised to new heights, love for our fellowman gives way to understanding and forgiveness, and hope for a better future sparks a joy that is unsurpassed than at any other time of the year.

So, what do we make of the nay sayers?...I say bring them on! I hope they continue to come to the discussion. It is not their negativity that should draw our attention, but the fact that our message is so strong, so loud, that they feel compelled to respond. Our message of the Gospel even attracts those who have no faith! This is incredible and maybe another reason for the season. I tend to wonder at that meeting at the waters edge, where John was baptizing, how many bystanders chose to follow Johns leading as they listened patiently while believers and unbelievers raised the issues. To the Jews John doesn't just remind them of the words of Isaiah, but is telling them to be prepared, *"I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord."* The first Advent is not only upon them, but is about to walk into their midst!

The crowd must be mesmerized. Have these priests and Levites been right all along? Well, let's take a minute...we haven't heard from the non-believers yet. *"And they (the Pharisees) asked him, and said unto him, why baptizest thou then, if thou be not that Christ, nor Elias, neither that prophet?"* Great question, valid and in need of an answer. Well, John has already confessed that he is not the messiah. The only admission he even makes of himself is that he is the Voice...the voice of God, crying out to any who will open their hearts and listen...John is not only the forerunner of Jesus Christ, but the first believer and witness to the glorious truth of who Jesus is. John understands who Jesus is...a light that burns as brightly in his own time as it did before the heavens and the earth beheld their own creation. John knows the Messiah walks among us as he turns his attention to the Pharisees, *"I baptize with water: but there standeth one among you, whom ye know not; He it is,*

who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose."

"...whom ye know not..." John's simple words expose the ignorance of those whose minds and hearts are closed to the eternal truth...a truth that all mankind must face one day when Paul's words come true, *For it is written, as I live, saith the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to me. So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God*" (Romans 14:11-12)

In this season of Advent we are truly focused on this Word of God becoming flesh in the birth of Jesus Christ. It is God in the person of Jesus Christ who walked among us, the Word made flesh, co-eternal with God, co-equal with God, the very essence of God... and he has become one of us that we may rise to new life and ascend into the Glory Cloud of God Almighty! We must walk in faith carrying the torch of truth keeping the conversation going...who knows who may be listening and have their hearts stirred.

And now for you, believers, the faithful in heart, hearers not only of the word but doers, come to the Table and present yourselves holy and complete, washed by the blood of the Lamb who has become one of us that all may be redeemed.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.