

Walking in John's Way

For the Epistle: Is. xl: 1ff. The voice of him that crieth in the wilder- ness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: and the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it. The voice said, Cry. And he said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the goodness thereof is as the flower of the field: the grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the spirit of the LORD bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever.

From the Gospel: St. Luke I:57 ff. Elisabeth's full time came that she should be delivered; and she brought forth a son. And her neigh- bours and her cousins heard how the Lord had shewed great mercy upon her; and they rejoiced with her. And it came to pass, that on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child; and they called him Zacharias, after the name of his father. And his mother answered and said, Not so; but he shall be called John. And they said unto her, There is none of thy kindred that is called by this name. And they made signs to his father, how he would have him called. And he asked for a writing table, and wrote, saying, His name is John. And they marvelled all. And his mouth was opened immediately, and his tongue loosed, and he spake, and praised God. And fear came on all that dwelt round about them: and all these sayings were noised abroad throughout all the hill country of Judæa. And all they that heard them laid them up in their hearts, saying, What manner of child shall this be! And the hand of the Lord was with him...And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, and was in the deserts till the day of his shewing unto Israel.

The circumstances of John's birth reveal how momentous the arrival of this man was, and for that reason, they tell us just how significant was his mission. The angel Gabriel had announced the coming birth in a vision to his father, while he served as a priest in the temple, a vision which struck Zecharias dumb, since he hardly dared to believe it. When his wife Elizabeth, well past childbearing age, and never having borne children, became pregnant, she marveled, and dared not reveal her secret to anyone. When her cousin Mary arrived, herself pregnant, Elizabeth's unborn child leapt for joy, and both women prophesied. When Zecharias' tongue was finally loosed, today's Gospel says *fear came on all that dwelt round about them: and all these sayings were noised abroad throughout all the hill country of Judea.*

John came as the herald of the New Covenant. He was announcing the fulfillment of each and every cherished Old Testament prophesy, promise, and expectation, soon to be realized in the arrival of Messiah. So significant was his mission, that Christ Himself said, *Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist . . .* (Matt. 11:11a).

When John commenced his preaching ministry as an adult, he was immediately thrown into the middle of controversy. Think of the nature of his words, as they are foretold in our reading from Isaiah in place of the Epistle: *Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places*

plain. . . All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field: the grass withereth, the flower fadeth. . . These are mighty words, filled with authority, announcing the impartiality of divine judgment in no uncertain terms. For those who are high and lofty, it was bad news, very bad news; but for the lowly, in words Mary used when she sang to John's mother, *He hath . . . exalted them of low degree. He hath filled the hungry with good things.* One is brought low, and the other raised high, in order that all might become a level *highway for our God.*

Our focus today will be on the timeliness of this message today, and even more importantly, upon the qualifications necessary to bear it. The mighty are no less visible, and the trappings of their power no less intimidating, whether it be wealth, fame, political influence, or widespread admiration and respect. All the world does them homage, bowing the knee as they pass. To watch them is to desire what they have. To dwell upon them is to experience the hopelessness of one's efforts to attain to the place they occupy. Everywhere they go, they leave envy and longing in their train. All the world lives to emulate them.

In such a situation, we are sent forth in John's sandals to prophesy. The coarse, rough *camel's hair* garment and *leathern girdle* (Matt. 3:4) that he wears is self-discipline and self-control, the never easy Christian way of life imposed upon us if we desire to do God's will. The *locusts and wild honey* which are his sole food is God's Word, lean fare and tasteless to the world, but filled with richness and nourishment for him, and for us. In such a manner are we also sent forth.

"I'm no prophet," you reply. But we are all called to a prophetic lifestyle. It is one that will always speak boldly and plainly, whether in the mute proclamation of a holy life, or in appropriate words at an appropriate time. If not each of you, if not I, where we are, with *whom* we are, them who? Has God sent someone else to occupy the two square feet where my own shoes stand, at any given moment? Did He make some mistake in my assignment, and place me somewhere when I should have been elsewhere, while He gave others the task He should have given me? To say "yes," of course, is a denial of the sovereign power of God, whose limits are only those we force upon Him by our lack of faith and vision.

Many use very unreliable means for fulfilling that prophetic role which is suppose to be among the callings of the Church. We assume that the matter will be worked out politically, and so we expend the bulk of our energies attempting by the power of a majority vote to overrule the opposition and firmly reinforce righteousness. The last few decades have shown us the success of

our best efforts, and the emptiness of our current bag of ideas should inform us of the prospects for the future. Ah, but let us turn to watch John. He is all alone, but look at his triumphs: *Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and all the region round about Jordan, And were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins* (Matt 3:5, 6a). In one fell swoop he blesses the believing, and condemns the hypocrites. Soon, his unswerving devotion to truth will earn imprisonment for him, but with it will come an audience to share the Gospel even with an evil, royal household. His single-mindedness brought him results which ten years of careful planning could never have achieved.

We too are to *go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways; to give knowledge of salvation unto his people by the remission of their sins, through the tender mercy of our God . . .* But this is 2017, and we must reconsider how this is to be fulfilled. Let us look again to John. He was distinct; he was easy to identify. John gave proof to the cause with which he aligned himself by the man he was. All who witnessed his ministry had no problem equating him with the stark and life-changing message he proclaimed. They saw no disjunction. And so it must be for us. Just because someone *says* something doesn't make it so. But when someone lives it, very little more need be said. It may well be that we will find the contemporary wilderness which is the theater of our preaching far less hostile than we thought, when others are thoroughly convinced that the message matches the people. We can no longer count on easy identification of who and what we are. The church as an institution means very little. Religious language has passed away from popular use. We have little else to testify with than our lives.

[H]e shall be filled with the Holy Ghost (Lk. 1:15) were among Gabriel's words of promise to Zecharias about his son. John, like so many other saints, had pushed everything else out of life except that which matter most, in order to allow the Holy Spirit sole occupancy. The Spirit of God tailors His mission to the needs of the hour with a genius that all of our planning and good intentions cannot contrive. We will discover the means only step by step, as we yield increasingly, and as God's glorious will unfolds. We get out of God's way, making ourselves available to Him, that He might have His way.

In the end, John proved his strength and might through yielding to Christ Himself. *He must increase, but I must decrease* (Jn. 3:30), was his succinct answer to those who sought to urge him to follow his own agenda. It is the summary of all that is implied in walking in John's way. John gave his best for a purpose that belonged to Another. This is the key. He was fulfilled as he

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fulfilled the One of whom he declared *There cometh one mightier than I after me, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to stoop down and unloose* (Mark 1:7).

Now we understand his greatness, and it is a clue to our own. There is simply no other path to the success of the mission of the Church. I am not calling you, nor me, to leave our homes and enter the wilderness, to do anything other than remain in the place, the time, the context in which we have been divinely put. But we will be of no value there to the divine mission, unless we follow John in his choices and make his priorities our own.

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