

Third Sunday of Advent

December 11, 2005

John 1: 6-8, 19-28

Homilist: S. Katherine Jean Cowan, OP

In today's Gospel passage, we hear John the Baptist asked repeatedly, "Who are you." While we have only a handful of information on John, what we do know easily gives rise to that question.

"Who are you" who live on grasshoppers and wild honey? "Who are you" who live in the desert, clothed in camel's hair and a leather belt? "Who are you" without the political savvy to realize that criticizing Herod and his marriage would lead to your imprisonment and death?

But if these are questions that circle around the figure of John the Baptist, there is also fascination. Jesus' first followers were disciples of John; Herod, who would order his death, was intrigued by John. Eccentric, calling a spade a spade, John did not wander alone on the banks of the Jordan as he stood at the mid-point between the Old and New testaments-the culmination of what had been, pointing to what was to come. In some mysterious way, he was denied entrance into the New. A contemporary of Christ, he could only point to him; he was not asked to follow as were so many New Testament figures.

Against this backdrop of question and fascination-and indeed strength-there was incredible integrity in John. The crowds may not have known who John was and thus demanded an answer from him about his identify. John had no such confusion and was not afraid to share the truth of who he was. He was not the light, not the Messiah-those roles belonged to Christ. He was not a prophet. He knew that his role was to lead others to the Christ-as a voice urging a straight path for the one who was to come.

The figure of John the Baptist has come and gone. Does this leave us with only nice pieces of history? Not by a long shot-we are the John the Baptists today-and Advent is our season. John was called to prepare for the first coming of Christ; we are called to prepare for the second coming of this same Messiah. This is being true to who we are.

We do not have to look for ways outside our own homes to fulfill this call. All of us, in one way or another, are caught up in the seemingly unending tasks that precede Christmas: cards, shopping, baking, wrapping presents, going to parties, giving parties, decorating (inside and outside)-the list never seems to end. The list is not bad; it speaks of great love and concern for family and friends-or at least it should. Our task is to make sure that all of our Christmas preparations are clothed in love. This may mean that we slow our lives down a bit, do a little less-so that what is done is truly done in joy and blessing. Perhaps we bake four different kinds of cookies, instead of five or six-giving us time to spend with family and friends; or we simplify the parties so that we truly enjoy our guests. Perhaps we give one less material gift and give instead the gift of our attentive presence. Perhaps we give less to family and friends so that we can give more to the less fortunate. However we approach this cutting back or stepping up to the plate for another, such practices can become life-long friends, shedding blessings on all holidays and special occasions.

John the Baptist responded with hesitation to the question of who he was. May Advent be a time for us to answer that question about ourselves and to live our truth more fully.