

Sunday Homily

3RD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

13 DECEMBER 2020

YEAR B

“He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed,
‘I am not the Messiah.’”

John 1:20

Illustration

In one of the episodes of the American television comedy *Friends*, Phoebe is challenged to do a good deed from which she derives no benefit at all. It proves much harder than she expected. Every time she does something kind or generous, somehow it always turns out to contain something for her, too. The serious question in the midst of Phoebe’s increasingly desperate attempts to do something completely unselfish is whether there can really be a wholly altruistic act, or whether, like it or not, we always act only to benefit ourselves in some way or another.

Gospel Teaching

On the face of it, John the Baptist does seem to have achieved Phoebe’s goal. It is very hard to see what John the Baptist gets out of his witness to Jesus.

As we meet John at the beginning of the Gospel accounts, he is at the height of his fame. He has a great many disciples and people flock to hear him preach and to be baptised by him. He says what God gives him to say, under all circumstances, and without softening his message to suit important ears. He is not afraid to reprove King Herod for his immoral lifestyle, for example.

The religious leaders of his day are clearly impressed enough by John to wonder if he can be the Messiah for whom they are all waiting. He has all the right credentials. He comes from a priestly family, and his birth is surrounded by miracle and prophecy.

What’s more, his message of judgement and his call to repentance are exactly what the religious authorities would expect the Messiah to say. All the prophets of old echoed John’s warning to the people to repent or face God’s judgement. Taken in conjunction with John’s fearlessness in the face of authority, which would surely make him willing, if necessary, to take on the hated Roman usurpers of the nation’s independence, it is entirely understandable that they come to ask John, point-blank, “Who are you?”

If there is any area of uncertainty in John, any deeply buried belief that perhaps he is, after all, God’s chosen Messiah, the Gospels show no sign of it. He is emphatic in his denials.

We do not know quite how John prepared himself for this time, though tradition has it that he lived as an ascetic in the desert for many years before starting his ministry. Matthew's Gospel tells us that he wore clothes of itchy camel's hair, and lived on locusts and wild honey, all of which would seem to bear out the testimony to his self-denying lifestyle. But whatever he has been doing for the years since his birth, it has honed his vocation to this point, the moment at which he can say, forcefully, "I am not the Messiah."

As far as the Gospels are concerned, when John has baptised Jesus and recognised him and witnessed to him, his work is done. When John is later imprisoned and then executed by Herod that is a sad event but not a tragic one for the Gospel writers, because John has already fulfilled his life's purpose.

Humanly speaking, it is hard to see what satisfaction John could have got from his mission. A life of self-denial, brutally cut short; an influential ministry, remembered only in the context of someone else's far more important work – hardly the epitaph most of us would wish for.

But all the years of prayer and attention to God that allowed John to stand up and say with utter clarity, "I am not the Messiah," may perhaps have given him enough insight to know his own value in God's eyes. John was doing the thing for which he was born; he saw what all the prophets longed to see – God's Messiah coming to bring justice and peace to the whole world. So perhaps his altruism had its rewards, after all.

Application

John's calling is unique. He was born to stand on the cusp between the old world and the new creation in Christ. He was born to point forward to what all the rest of us can now receive. Thanks, at least in part, to his faithful witness, we do not have to wonder if Jesus is God's fulfilment or not. We know.

But now we have to take up John's mantle and bear witness to Jesus. John did it alone, and when no one else recognised Jesus, but he did what we are all born to do. He saw who Jesus was and he told the world. Now it's our turn.