

# Overlooking External; Recognizing the Obvious

Third Sunday of Advent – Year A

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*Isaiah 35:1-6a, 10*  
*Psalms 146:6-7, 8-9, 9-10*

*James 5:7-10*  
*Matthew 11:2-11*

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If one were to ask the average Catholic to name the greatest person born of woman (aside from Jesus) most of them would stand erect, place their hands over their heart, chant the *Salve Regina* and then tell you without hesitation – the Immaculate and Most Holy Blessed Virgin Mother of God (that is to say, Mary)! Hands down, plain and clear, nothing more obvious to our tradition! And yet we have in the Gospel for this *Gaudete* Sunday, Jesus himself declaring *John the Baptist* to be the greatest. Clear, obvious and from the mouth of the Messiah! At the same time, however, Jesus indicates that the least in the kingdom is still greater than John (but it is still quite a compliment to the Baptist).

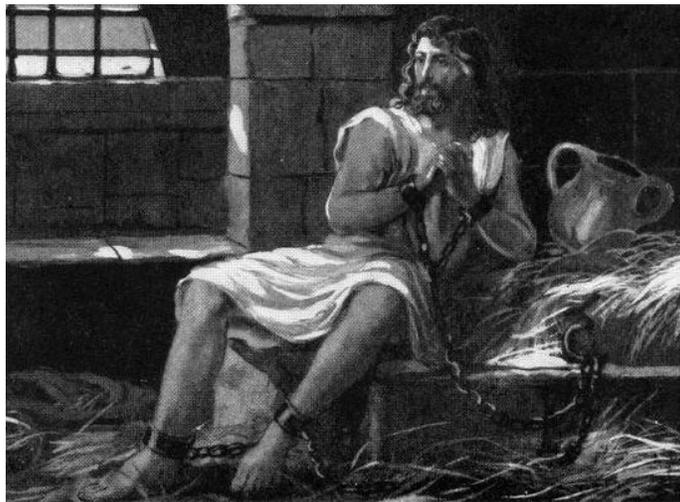
It may, therefore, be somewhat puzzling when John the Baptist, from prison, asks the question he does – is Jesus, the one John spent his life paving the way for, the one who provoked John's stirring even in the womb; is Jesus truly the one who is to come, or is there someone else?

How can John's greatness be reconciled with such a question? Has John's inspir-

ation decreased to a moment of doubt? We would surely do a double take at such a question coming from the man whose very mission was to prepare the people for the coming of the Messiah.

Perhaps, like Jesus' detractors, John's expectation of the Messiah was different from what eventually came to be. Maybe he too was expecting someone grander; a great king, a military leader, a political liberator who would usher in a physical manifestation of God's reign on earth, overthrowing the Roman oppressors and establishing the dominance of God's holy people. Instead, he is presented with a simple carpenter who began by joining John's followers in baptism (much to John's confusion) and associated himself not with military leaders, nor with social greatness, but with the lowly; not with the politically powerful or religious elite, but with the sinner.

Perhaps John was a little perplexed by such a paradox; perhaps he was merely reiterating the questions of his own followers who were confused by what they saw (and didn't see) in Jesus. Yet, unlike Jesus'



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## John the Baptist: Recognizing the Obvious

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other detractors, who simply condemned, crucified and otherwise criticized the “blasphemy” of a man who was, to others, so obviously wrong, John the Baptist *asked questions*. He did not descend into doubt and judgment. He looked for clarification. Rather than allow his confusion to draw him away, he sought to understand better.

Even then, Jesus does not give a clear answer. Rather, Jesus instructs John and his followers to recognize what is right there in front of them, things that should be blatantly obvious. In short, Jesus tells John not to be distracted (i.e. stumbling block) by what Jesus is at first glance: a simple, rather unimpressive carpenter from the small town of Nazareth. He tells John to look at the fruits of his work – the blind see, the cripple walk, the sick are cured the dead are raised and the destitute are uplifted by the good news. If these things do not convince people that Jesus is “He who is to come,” nothing will.

In the same way, Jesus points out the same paradox in John himself. Why did the people go, of all places, into the desert, rather than to lavish palaces, to hear the message of John? Not because he was impressive to look at, or was himself lavishly dressed, but because of something quite obvious to one who is undistracted by externals – this wild man of the desert was a prophet from God whose message of repentance resonated with those who heard it.

So who is the messenger sent to prepare the way of the Lord, the greatest

man born of woman? Is it this wild man of the desert who dresses in camel’s hair and eats grasshoppers and wild honey, or is it the prophet who calls the people to repentance? Who is the man that is “He who is to come”? Is it this simple, unimpressive carpenter from Nazareth, or is it the one who cures the sick, raises the dead and brings the good news to the poor?

In the same vein, who are the followers of the Son of God? Are they these common folk, unimpressive by their station in life (or lack thereof) who live according to an objectionable, politically incorrect

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value system compared the modern, “enlightened” and elite minds, or are they the witnesses who answer the call of God himself to preach and bear witness to the Good News? What is this church of God that Jesus left? Is it this institution with a checkered history, occasional scandal and regular manifestations of human frailty, or is it the body of leaders and believers who continue to serve as the conduit through which “He who is to come” is continually present in our world, overcoming any shortcomings, continually

preaching the Good News, calling all to repentance, serving the poor and, through its sacraments, bringing God’s saving grace to a waiting world?

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