

Second Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A

Isaiah 49: 3, 5-6

Psalm 40: 2, 4, 7-8, 8-9, 10

1 Corinthians 1: 1-3

John 1: 29-34

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To me, John the Baptist is one of the most compelling figures in the New Testament. Certainly the people of his own time found him fascinating. Great crowds of them trooped out to the Jordan River to hear this strange man dressed in camel skins preach repentance, and to be baptized by him. Our Gospel today records the moment when John's mission is finally fulfilled - the moment when he sees Jesus approaching and cries out "Look there! There is the man I have been telling you about. The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world."

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about John the Baptist is that he is mentioned in the Scriptures at all. The writers of the New Testament had good reasons to leave him out -- to hush him up -- to pretend that he didn't exist.

You see, not all of John's disciples were converted to Christ. Many continued to insist that John, not Jesus, was the Messiah. For many years after John's death, Christians debated with John's followers over who was really the Lamb of God. And its not as if the Christians had all of the good arguments on their side. The Baptist's followers would ask Christians, "How can you claim your master is greater than ours, when it was our John who baptized your Jesus?"

So when the time came to write the Gospels, there had to be a great temptation to leave John out of the narrative. But when push came to

shove, the Evangelists couldn't bring themselves to exclude John from the story. Why? Because Jesus had spoken of him too often, and with too much love. A person of whom Jesus had spoken so highly, could not be left out of the Good News of Christ.

Some scholars think that John once belonged to a Jewish sect called the Essenes. The Essenes were convinced that the Messiah was about to come, and that it was necessary to prepare for his arrival by repenting their sins and by living lives of asceticism and ritual purity. Because they felt that the cities of the time were hopelessly corrupted, they retreated to the desert, far away from other people, and carefully prepared themselves for their own salvation.

But John couldn't find peace with the Essenes. He wasn't satisfied with securing his own salvation. He cared too much about the people of Israel -- the people back in those corrupted cities. So he risked everything -- his own purity --his own salvation, to bring them a warning -- to give them one last chance to reform their lives.

From John we learn that we can't be concerned only with our own well-being, whether physical, emotional, or spiritual. We can't take as our motto, "I'm O.K. -- you're on your own." John didn't stay in the desert with the Essenes. We can't remain in a desert of self-interest. We have to be willing to take the risk of reaching out to other people. I'm only doing well if I'm helping others to do well.

So John set out to bring his message to the people. He couldn't quite bring himself to go into those cities, but in their thousands the people, desperate for a word of hope, streamed out to him. And gradually, John, who wanted only to prepare the way for the messiah, became famous in his own right. Crowds hung on his every word.

Devoted disciples clustered around him, offering to dedicate their lives to him and his cause. Word began to spread that John himself was to be the savior of Israel.

This had to be a time of tremendous temptation for John. If, like me, you've been watching a lot of football and basketball games on television lately, you'll have noticed that whenever a television camera focuses on the crowd, they all stand up and wave, eager to be celebrities, if only for a moment. Human nature hasn't changed much in a couple of thousand years. Imagine what it must have felt like for John to go from complete obscurity to tremendous fame. Not long before, he had been huddling in the desert. Now he was being proclaimed the messiah of God. This must have been an intoxicating experience. He had to be tempted to 'believe his own press clippings' -- to conclude that he really was who they said he was.

But when the crucial moment came, on that day when he saw Jesus walking toward him, He had the integrity to tell his disciples, "That's him over there. He is the chosen one of God -- the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Leave me and go to him. I must decrease and he must increase.

We can learn from John's integrity. As much as we long for acceptance, as much as we want to be respected and admired for our talents and achievements, our lives can't focus on ourselves. Ultimately, our lives have to be directed outward. They have to point to other people -- and to the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.