

SPIRITUALITY

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

Isa 61:1 (cited in Luke 4:18)

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me

to bring glad tidings to the poor.

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel John 1:6-8, 19-28; L8B

A man named John was sent from God.
He came for testimony, to testify to the
light,

so that all might believe through him.

He was not the light,

but came to testify to the light.

And this is the testimony of John.
When the Jews from Jerusalem
sent priests and Levites to
him

to ask him, "Who are you?"
he admitted and did not deny it,
but admitted, "I am not the
Christ."

So they asked him,

"What are you then? Are you Elijah?"

And he said, "I am not."

"Are you the Prophet?"

He answered, "No."

So they said to him,

"Who are you, so we can give an answer
to those who sent us?"

What do you have to say for yourself?"

He said:

"I am *the voice of one crying out in the
desert,*

'make straight the way of the Lord,'
as Isaiah the prophet said."

Some Pharisees were also sent.

They asked him,

"Why then do you baptize

if you are not the Christ or Elijah or the
Prophet?"

John answered them,

"I baptize with water;

but there is one among you whom you do
not recognize,

the one who is coming after me,

whose sandal strap I am not worthy to
untie."

This happened in Bethany across the Jordan,
where John was baptizing.

Reflecting on the Gospel

On this "Gaudete" (Rejoice) Sunday, other readings and the gospel acclamation may speak more directly to joy or glad tidings than the gospel, which gives us its version of the story of John. Of course, he is often referred to as John the Baptist in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, but not in this gospel. Here he is clearly and simply called a "man" (John 1:6), and when he is named, it is merely "John" without modifier (e.g., 1:6, 15, 19, 26, 28, 32). In this way, and in many others in this gospel, he is distinguished from Jesus.



The Fourth Gospel states clearly and unequivocally that John was not the light, but was sent from God to testify to the light (John 1:8). John admits that he is not the Messiah; he is not Elijah. (In both Matthew [11:14] and Mark [9:13], John is considered the Elijah figure, said to be so by Jesus himself.) In the Fourth Gospel, John is not even the prophet. His role is to cry out in the desert, "make straight the way of the Lord." Such a deflection away from any attention or claims to himself seems to reflect the interests of the evangelist more than the historical situation of the time. Indeed, there are other clues in the Fourth Gospel and other New Testament writings that tell us that John continued to have a following years, perhaps decades, after his death. Today we recognize that John prepared the way for Jesus.

This first chapter of the Fourth Gospel reminded the early Christian community that John was merely a precursor, a forerunner, to Jesus the Messiah. We have heard these stories so often, and frequently from the Synoptic point of view. When we read the Fourth Gospel on its own terms we see that John says he baptizes with water. We might expect him to say, "but the one coming after me baptizes with the Holy Spirit" as we hear in the Synoptics. Instead, John says, "I baptize with water; / but there is *one among you whom you do not recognize.*" There is nothing in this gospel about Jesus baptizing with the Holy Spirit. Instead, Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Even the use of the term sin in the singular rather than the plural is deliberate. Rather than merely taking away individual sins, Jesus takes away the cosmic force of sin. The Fourth Gospel reflects a different but congruent theological thought world than the Synoptics. The differences in details may seem minute but they point to profound theological emphases.

Once John points the way to Jesus, once he testifies to the Lamb of God, John in effect disappears from the gospel (there are some minor passing references). His role is basically confined to chapter 1 of the Fourth Gospel, and it consists in testifying to Jesus.

Living the Paschal Mystery

When we see how John gave testimony to Jesus we recognize him as a model for ourselves. John is not the center of attention. When he receives attention he deflects it to Jesus. John will not even claim the title of prophet. He is merely a pointer to Jesus. After accomplishing his role John recedes into the background so that the one who is already in their midst might be made more fully known.

Where do we find Jesus in our midst? Are we pointing to that reality, and testifying to it? Once having done so, do we then recede into the background?

Focusing the Gospel

John 1:6-8, 19-28

Today’s gospel is the Fourth Gospel’s portrait of John’s baptismal ministry. In a scene unique to the Fourth Gospel, a delegation of priests and Levites from the city confront John about his preaching and baptizing. John responds that he is not Elijah, the great prophet who was expected to return in the last days of time to announce the coming of the Messiah; John claims to be only the “voice of one crying out in the desert.” But, John says, the Messiah they have waited for has already come and is “among you.”

There is serenity about this portrait of John: there are no descriptions of wearing camel hair and eating locusts or wild honey; there are no rantings to repent or angry confrontations with official Jerusalem. The Baptist of the Fourth Gospel is a figure of peace and humility. John preaches that God has revealed himself to his people through the incarnation of his Word, Jesus the Christ, and John has been called to testify (to witness) to this revelation as standing “among you whom you do not recognize.”

Forms of “baptism” were common in the Judaism of gospel times. But John’s baptism was distinctive: his baptism at the Jordan was a rite of repentance and *metanoia*—a conversion of heart and spirit. John’s ministry fulfilled the promise of Ezekiel (Ezek 36:25-26): at the dawn of a new age, the God of Israel would purify his people from their sins with clear water and instill in them a new heart and spirit.

Focusing the First Reading

Isa 61:1-2a, 10-11

Today’s first reading is the prophet Isaiah’s proclamation of his mission to the exiles returning to Jerusalem in the sixth century BC, after decades of slavery in Babylon. It is the beginning of a new era of hope for Israel: Judah, condemned to exile because of the injustice of its economic and social systems, will be restored by the Spirit to a new commitment to justice for the poor. In Luke’s gospel, Jesus himself reads these words at the beginning of his preaching and healing ministry (Luke 4:16-20).

Focusing the Responsorial Psalm

Luke 1:46-48, 49-50, 53-54 (Isa 61:10b)

Today’s response to the first reading is not from the psalms but a weaving of Mary’s song of praise in Luke’s gospel upon her greeting from Elizabeth with images from the prophet Isaiah’s canticle of hope for the returning exiles (Isa 61, today’s first reading). Both Mary’s song and Isaiah’s prophecy celebrate that God is recreating humankind in his goodness and mercy.

Focusing the Second Reading

1 Thess 5:16-24

Paul’s exhortation to rejoice gives this Third Sunday of Advent its traditional name *Gaudete Sunday*. Today’s second reading is the conclusion of what scholars recognize as the oldest surviving documents of Christianity, Paul’s first letter to the Christian church at Thessalonica (written around 51 AD). The apostle Paul has spoken sternly to the Thessalonian community about their passivity as they await the Lord’s return. He concludes his letter urging them to embrace the joy that is experienced in following the Spirit’s prompting to create the ideals of Christian community: joy, thanksgiving, wise discernment, seeking and maintaining the common good.

PROMPTS FOR HOMILISTS, CATECHISTS, AND RCIA TEAMS

What signs can you point to of the Word of God’s compassion in the midst of your parish/community?

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

Who have been the “prophets” you have known in your life who “proclaimed” to you the reality of God’s love and mercy?

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

What images of light and darkness speak to you this Advent?

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

As you read the opening verses of Isaiah 61, what do you sense the Spirit of God is “sending” you to do?

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....
.....