

Rorate Coeli 2024
John 1:19-28 (ESV)

“John answered them, “I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, even He Who comes after me, the strap of Whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.””

In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Well, a blessed 4th and final Sunday in Advent to you, dear ones. The time for us to celebrate our blessed Lord’s nativity is very nearly upon us; Christmas Day is imminent, and I just have to say right up front here, what better way to celebrate God our Father giving us the most glorious gift of His Son in human flesh for our salvation—what better way to honor our Father in heaven for such a priceless gift than to be gathered here, in His holy house, with His holy people singing His praises?

I hope you’re looking forward to being here on Christmas morning just as much as I am. And I’m also hopeful that we can learn a great deal today as we prepare and contemplate the confession of St. John the Baptist in our Gospel text.

Truly, he was faithfully preparing the way of the Lord according to his calling; he knew Christ’s arrival was at hand; and thus he responds to the priests and Levites and their inquisition in a manner very instructive for us as the baptized faithful, dear ones—very instructive.

Today, I hope we’ll take to heart what John the Baptist ultimately confesses about our Lord Jesus, and also, then, what true piety looks like for us as true Christians who, similar to John, serve Christ in meekness, fully aware of His great majesty and eminence as He draws near to save us.

When priests and Levites were sent from Jerusalem to question John the Baptist, you have to see this for what it was. You have to know this was more than just some passing interest on their part.

Just imagine seeing people throughout Judea and beyond coming out to John en masse, coming from all over in droves, even if only to catch a glimpse of this holy man; imagine everyone talking about him in their homes and among their peers; with scores of people receiving from him a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of their sins.

John the Baptizer was a phenomenon, to say the least. And as our Lord Himself even says later in this very same book of the Gospel, John the Baptist was a burning and shining lamp among God’s people, leading even the Pharisees and religious elite to rejoice for a time in his light (John 5). They knew someone truly great had come into their midst, sent from God. Little did they know, however, among them also stood One greater than both him and King Solomon.

But in any case, when the delegation of priests and Levites arrive, they come to make a formal inquiry and investigation. You can feel the anticipation building, the suspense looming as they come to question him.

“Who are *you*?” they ask. “Who are *you*?”

But despite his celebrity status and success, despite being in the limelight and being a great light himself, look how he responds to their questioning:

He simply responds by saying, “I am not the Christ.”... That’s it. Until they question him further, that’s all he says.

Notice how he doesn’t rush to say, “I’m not the Christ, but let’s take a look my resume, shall we? Let’s talk about how many people I’ve baptized, how many thousands have been enthralled by my preaching. I think we all know what a success I’ve been, don’t we?”

He doesn’t do this. Instead, he cuts right to the chase and is content to say nothing more in that moment than that he’s not the Christ. He’s not concerned with any disappointment or disapproval they may feel towards him. He’s pleased simply to speak the truth with honesty and humility.

So, they question him again. “Are you Elijah?” they ask. Surely, this man will own up to being some great figure we know to expect. Maybe he’s the great one who was promised by God through the prophet Malachi.

And here too, John simply says, “I am not.” He confesses he’s *not* the very same prophet who was carried off into heaven on a chariot of fire, and once again, he’s fine with leaving it at that.

And so too, when they ask if he’s the prophet promised in Deuteronomy, whom God would raise up to be like Moses, here as well, John simply says, “No.”

He doesn’t try to impress them or to inflate his own ego. He doesn’t see any reason to do so. He doesn’t see any need. When he speaks, it’s as if his focus is centered on something else entirely—or, more accurately, on some-*One* else entirely—not himself.

John the Baptist was fully aware of his standing before the truly great One following after him, Whose imminent reign would soon be manifest, and he knew it. John knew himself to be a humble servant of Christ our Lord, sent on ahead to prepare His way.

And thus, John’s questioning in our Gospel lesson concludes very fittingly with him pointing his interrogators not to himself, but ultimately to Christ, saying “the strap of Whose sandal I am not worthy to untie”—one of the most menial and lowly of tasks, and John couldn’t boast of being worthy even to do that.

So, dear ones, what makes us think we have any room to boast about anything we’ve done or might do?

What is it in us that leads us to speak and act so differently than John the Baptist does here? Is it not the lusts of the flesh and the pride of life? Is it not just sin that makes us want to make our own name great, to make sure everyone else thinks we’re just as special as we think we

are, and to act as if God had no part whatsoever in blessing us with a good name and a good reputation?

Dear ones, the words and deeds and the whole demeanor of John the Baptist reflect how great he knew Christ to be in relation to himself. And isn't fitting for us to imitate him in this way?—to be captivated by the Messiah and His majesty like John, and to conduct ourselves accordingly.

I think it's certainly fitting because we know Jesus comes as both King David's son and his Lord. As true man, Jesus descends from the royal ancestry of David, according to the flesh, and according to Christ's divinity as true God, He's begotten of none other than God the Father, coeternal and coequal with Him in glory and majesty.

Christ Jesus is King—*the* King, with divine, royal blood flowing through His veins, blood which He would sacrificially shed on the beams of His wooden throne, for the forgiveness of all our sins, making full satisfaction for them to the Father.

Tell me, what is the greatness of wearing a crown of gold compared to the crown of thorns He received, as He bore the curse of our sin for our sake?

What is the greatness of being adorned with jewels and precious stones compared to wounds and scars He still wears, which secured our redemption?

And so, like John the Baptist, how can we boast and be prideful before One so great as this? Surely, such things should find no place among us, dear ones.

Surely, our words and deeds and disposition should instead confess the greatness of Christ Jesus, our King.

And as His faithful, baptized servants, who die to ourselves and live to serve Him freely, may we consider it an honor to show Him the true piety and devotion and reverence He deserves, and by returning this Wednesday to celebrate His holy nativity.

Because God our Father has given us salvation in His Incarnate Son, and what greater gift is there than that?

To the same Jesus Christ, our great God and King, be all the glory forever and ever. Amen.