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John the Baptist, the Paradox of Advent

Biblical Reflection for Second Sunday of Advent C

By Father Thomas Rosica, CSB

TORONTO, DEC. 1, 2009 ([Zenit.org](http://zenit.org)).- In today's Gospel text, the evangelist who Dante Alighieri called the "scriba manuetidinis Christi" (scribe of the gentleness of Christ), presents his theme of the universality of salvation, which he announced earlier in the words of Simeon (Luke 2:30-32).

He does this by casting the call of John the Baptist in the form of an Old Testament prophetic call (Luke 3:2), and by using the quotation from Isaiah found in Mark 1:3 (Isaiah 40:3), and adding the next two verses in Luke 3:5-6.

Let us consider several historical details offered by Luke in today's prophetic call story.

Tiberius Caesar succeeded Augustus as emperor in A.D. 14 and reigned until A.D. 37. The 15th year of his reign would have fallen between A.D. 27 and 29. Pontius Pilate was prefect of Judea from A.D. 26 until 36. The Jewish historian Josephus describes him as a greedy and ruthless prefect who had little regard for the local Jewish population and their religious practices (Luke 13:1). The Herod who is mentioned is Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great who ruled over Galilee and Perea from 4 B.C. to A.D. 39.

Luke not only situates the call of John the Baptist in terms of the civil rulers of that period, but he also mentions the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the religious leadership of Palestine. Annas had been high priest from A.D. 6-15. After being deposed by the Romans in A.D. 15, he was succeeded by various members of his family and eventually by his son-in-law, Caiaphas, who was high priest from A.D. 18-36.

Against the backdrop of this sweeping history, the word of God came to John in the Judean desert. Luke is alone among the New Testament writers in associating the preaching of John with a call from God. The evangelist thereby identifies John with the prophets whose ministries began with similar calls. Later on, Luke separates the ministry of John the Baptist from that of Jesus by reporting the imprisonment of John before the baptism of Jesus (Luke 3:21-22).

Luke uses this literary device to serve his understanding of the periods of salvation history. With John the Baptist, the time of promise, the period of Israel, comes to an end; with the baptism of Jesus and the descent of the Spirit upon him, the time of fulfillment, the period of Jesus, begins.

In his second volume, the Acts of the Apostles, Luke will introduce the third epoch in salvation history, the period of the Church. In Luke 7:26, John will be described as "more than a prophet"; he is also the precursor of Jesus (Luke 7:27), a transitional figure inaugurating the period of the fulfillment of prophecy and promise.

In describing the expectation of the people (Luke 3:15), Luke is characterizing the time of John's preaching in the same way as he had earlier described the situation of other devout Israelites in the infancy narrative (Luke

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2:25-26, 37-38). In Luke 3:7-18, Luke presents the preaching of John the Baptist who urges the crowds to reform in view of the coming wrath (Luke 3:7, 9), and who offers the crowds certain standards for reforming social conduct (Luke 3:10-14), and who announces to the crowds the coming of one mightier than he (Luke 3:15-18).

Authenticity

The true prophets of Israel help us in our struggle against all forms of duplicity. John the Baptist is the patron saint par excellence of authenticity. How often our words, thoughts and actions are incoherent! Combined in John the Baptist is the very paradox of Advent: the coming triumph of God manifest precisely in the darkness of the present evil age.

John the Baptist heard, experienced and lived God's liberating word in the desert and was thus able to preach it to others so effectively because his life and message were one. He certainly didn't mince words. John the Baptist shatters the silence of the wilderness with his cry: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." Not just "repent," change the way we live, but repent and prepare for the coming of the kingdom of heaven, which will upset all our securities and overturn anything we try to leave in place. The joy and the challenge of Advent is that in Jesus Christ our God is coming, and our aching and longing for God will be met. But this God who comes is disturbing.

There was nothing politically correct about the Baptist's message. He got right to the point and said what needed to be said. He told the first people who came to him to share. He told the tax collectors to be just. He told the soldiers to make peace.

The Baptist taught the people of his day and our day that the Messiah comes to save us from the powers of duplicity, despair, darkness and death, and to put us back on the path of peace and reconciliation so that we might find our way back to God. John the Baptist's life and mission remind us how badly we need a Savior to save us, in order that we might be all that we are called to be and do all that we have to do to live in the Light. So often we fail to recognize the one among us who is our Way, our Truth and our Life. This is what Advent is all about: finding our way back to God.

Transformation of our deserts

Advent is a mystery that transforms and not simply informs. Advent remains with its paradoxical combination of waiting and hastening, suffering and joy, judgment and deliverance, apocalyptic woe and eschatological hope. Unfortunately for our culture of instant gratification, hope requires incompleteness. To hope, in the true Advent fashion, is to live with the certainty of unfulfilled desire.

The God who was a highway engineer making new ways through the wilderness, a gardener turning deserts into flower gardens, is now the artist painting a new perspective of the age-old messianic promise of hope. Hope in God cannot stand still, because -- as Isaiah reminds us, we hope in a God who is constantly doing a new thing. Does our hope in God hold fast in the face of chaos and confusion in our life? How do we live with the Word of God? How can we live with the silence of God?

Advent teaches us that if we are quiet in our hearts long enough, we will discover the God still carves out highways and turns the desert places of our lives into oases of wonder, life, beauty, even though nothing will be as we expected. Any transformation of the wilderness depends on water.

Throughout the Old Testament, God is spoken of as the one who gives or withholds water -- an image easily understood by people for whom water is a precious and controlled commodity. Few of us in the First World have an idea of drought. Our water piped into our homes deprives us of an image of God as the one on whom

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our very existence depends; similarly, electricity deludes us in to thinking we have the darkness under control. Together they rob us of daily experiences that could give vibrancy to the Advent invitation to revisit our dependence on God, to revisit our desire for God and to discover through the night of waiting that God does indeed come.

The message of Advent is not that everything is falling to pieces. Nor is it that God is in heaven and all is therefore well with the world. Rather the message of Advent is that when every fixed star on the moral compass is wavering, when all hell is breaking loose on earth, we hear once again the Baptist's consoling message: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

Yet even with the birth of Jesus, we learn that Jerusalem and Israel still awaited their redemption. The world still awaits its freedom from hunger, war, oppression, violence, persecution and suffering. We all await our redemption. Advent challenges us to look at the ways that we wait, the ways that we long for God, and the ways that we hope. What and who is the source of our Advent hope?

John the Baptist's life can be summed up in the image of a finger pointing to the one who was coming: Jesus Christ. If we are to take on John's role of preparing the way in today's world, our lives also will become the pointing fingers of living witnesses who demonstrate that Jesus can be found and that he is near. Jesus is the fulfillment of our longing, our hoping and waiting. Jesus alone can transform the deserts of our lives into living gardens of beauty and nourishment for the world.

Come, Lord Jesus! We need you now more than ever!

[The readings for the 2nd Sunday of Advent are Baruch 5:1-9; 1 Philippians 1:4-6, 8-11; and Luke 3:1-6]

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