

Every year on this Sunday there is a great discussion among preachers about today's Gospel. Did John himself doubt whether Jesus was the Christ? Or did he himself remain firm in this confession and send his disciples to Jesus for their sake, because they are doubting? If I had to guess I would say the vast majority of preachers today, and most Christians when they read or hear this text, think the former.

It may surprise you that almost without exception, the great preachers and teachers of the Scriptures for the first millennium and a half of the Church, understood today's Gospel in the latter way. That John was *not* doubting and wondering in himself, that he was confident in his knowledge of who Jesus was, and was rather directing his disciples who had their doubts, to Jesus.

I think I am fairly convinced of the older understanding. This is not simply because it's fair to say I'm a traditionalist at heart. It is rather from looking at the totality of how Scripture describes John, including our Lord's own words about him in today's Gospel. The angel Gabriel tells John's father, Zechariah, that John "**will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb**" (Lk 1:15). That truth is illustrated six months later when the Christ in Mary's womb enters Elizabeth's house and John, filled with the Spirit, does what faith always does, recognizes the Lord, and so he leaps for joy already as an unborn child.

In today's Gospel Jesus underscores this point by saying that John is not only a prophet, he is *more* than a prophet. Here we need to consider what that means. The prophets gave utterance according to the Spirit as the Word of the Lord came upon them. We often read, the Spirit of the Lord came upon so-and-so, or the word of the Lord came to so-and-so. John is spoken of differently. He too speaks God's Word as the prophets of old did, but he is also different. John, the angel says, is constantly filled with and directed by the Spirit. That is why he was such a weirdo. He is not doing as the other prophets did from time to time, doing odd things, prophetic actions for a time, other times quite normal, has a home life, a day job. John's entire existence is prophetic, as one filled with the Spirit to testify to the Christ.

John is also more than a prophet in the unique privilege that is given him. John is the one, out of all the prophets, who points not just his voice but his very finger to the Christ. By direct revelation from the Spirit John recognizes the Christ as He comes to be baptized. He sees the Spirit descending upon Him like a dove. And so without any doubt he says to his own disciples, not only on one occasion but repeatedly, constantly, "**Behold, the Lamb of God!**" "That is the Christ, follow Him!" (Jn 1:36). Even before our Lord's baptism, John prepares the way, announces the One who is to Come, already in the midst of Israel.

Our Lord describes John as no reed shaken by the wind. Jesus' point is precisely that what comes out of John's mouth doesn't change, it is *not* like the whistle of a reed that changes depending on which way the wind blows. John unceasingly, unchangingly, directs one and all in Israel at the waters of the Jordan, in the wilderness, and even from prison, to go to Jesus. "Oh, you aren't sure if Jesus is the Christ because I'm in here? Fine, go ask Him!"

John, with the question given to his disciples, does as many a teacher has done. He asks a question, sets it before his hearers to ponder that they might find the answer, not for their ignorant or doubting teacher, but for themselves. This is what Luther does when he asks of the parts of the Catechism, "What does this mean?" That is not because he doesn't know and wants you to tell him, but because he is directing you,

the Christian to consider how the Scriptures unpack the full content of the simple statements of the commandments, the Creed, and the petitions of the Lord's Prayer.

So we then do well to consider, why the contemporary rush to say John doubts if Jesus is the Christ? I don't it comes from a simplistic reading of John's question that forgets all the rest of how Scripture speaks of John. Because we don't just see this with John. We see this same move with many of the figures of the Bible. Often there is a nearly instantaneous move to point out their faults, their sins. To be sure, we see the failure of Abraham in his life as he waited for God's promise. But above all things Scripture itself holds Abraham up as the example of faith, **"he believed the LORD, and He counted it to him as righteousness"** (Gen 15:6). He willingly proceeded to sacrifice his only son Isaac whom he loved, confident that God would not renege on His promise, and so would raise Isaac from death. Scripture teaches us: hear "Abraham," and think "faith." But we will rush to remember his deceit in passing Sarah off as his sister to save his own neck, or his freely taking Hagar to bed.

Or David, where God describes him as **"a man after My own heart"** (Acts 13:22), we almost delight in recounting his great and terrible sins. Or with St. Mary, whom the Scriptures say all generations will call blessed, (Lk 1:48), because some Christians give her more than she is due, far too many Christians will give more attention to asserting her sinfulness, or even denigrate, or just ignore her.

Why is this? Because our sinful flesh reasons, if all these great heroes of the faith really aren't so heroic, if they are just examples of sinners who are not so great, then I do not need to take seriously the godly example of holy living given in them. If John, for all his weird discipline, ended up just as weak and doubting as I, then why should I bother disciplining my own body, practice self-denial of the world's dainties? If John could get to a point that he thinks perhaps he blew it, misidentified the Christ, how can I be so sure of having pure doctrine, the confidence of a faithful confession of Scripture? If even John wavered, despaired sitting in prison for defending holy marriage before a king, what hope is there of me confessing what marriage is, or any of God's teaching, before men?

It should be clear to you now, from Scripture, not only that John did not doubt who the Christ was, but that in John you see that people, Christian believers, can deny themselves as our Lord bids us, can know the truth, as Jesus tells us, can confess Him before men, as He directs us. And so also Christians can humbly trust in what God's Word promises as St. Mary so beautifully models. You can live in confident trust in God to order your steps and work out His good will for you, even when you are harried by enemies and your life is not what you would hope it would be, as demonstrated in King David.

The failures and sins of God's saints are not there to excuse our own sins or laziness in pursuing godliness. They are recorded to demonstrate God's mercy to poor sinners. They comfort us by showing God's grace that is sufficient for them and no less so for us. They do also model for us the godliness that we ought and are able to pursue in our own lives. John, better than no other, save our Lord Himself, is the best teacher to us of not making our home in this world, to have a constant eye toward the Lord's return, to spurn making ourselves too comfortable and at home in this life, and to care little for the judgment of men.

The people of sacred history also show us that perfect faith and sanctification that never complains or has personal angst or fear are never achieved in this life. Perhaps John himself did wonder where the fire and wrath and judgment upon sin and unbelief were, why it was taking so long. Maybe he did start to be curious if the winnowing fork borne by the Messiah would cast Herod from his throne and set John free in this

life. Paul did long to be free of the thorn in his flesh. Mary was pained in seeing her son nailed to the tree, felt the real sorrow of a mother. And you bear real ills that pain and grieve you. Faith and confidence in Christ Jesus does not mean we understand all things, or perfectly the reasoning behind God's timing.

But whatever angst or sorrow befalls God's saints, and it does befall us in this life, today you see the greatest of prophets languishing in prison, it is curbed by the joy of faith which recognizes who Jesus is. He is the One who is to Come. There is no doubt, no wondering for the Christian of that. He has proven it by making the blind to see, the lame to walk, by cleansing lepers and making the deaf to hear. The dead have been raised up, and the gospel of His resurrection from the dead, the atonement for all our sins and the promise of life everlasting is preached to every lowly soul.

So do not doubt this most central of questions. Who Jesus is, that He is the One who is to Come is clear and obvious, has been proven without a doubt. And whatever other question or sorrow that fills your mind or heart, John shows you where to go.

Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly!