

Pray More Advent Retreat 2019 - Transcript

Prepare the Way of the Lord Fr. Patrick Briscoe

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. One of my favorite college mottos is that of Dartmouth College in New Hampshire. Dartmouth's motto is "Vox clamantis in deserto," this great depiction of John the Baptist described as the voice crying out in the wilderness, the one who calls out in the desert. In fact, at the Catholic chapel there adjacent to the campus - known fondly by those who frequent it as AQ, or Aquinas House as it's more properly called - the chapel there has this beautiful stained glass window with this phrase in it, "Vox clamantis in deserto."

Well, the founder of Dartmouth College was hoping that it would be that voice crying out in the wilderness. That, in 1769, it might represent that voice crying out, expressing the Christian faith. This motto is so beautiful because it encapsulates not just one Christian's project, not just one view or aspiration of what one particular school might be, but, in many ways, it's the substance of the Christian vocation: To dare to be the voice that cries out in the wilderness, a voice today that can speak of Christ amid all the other noises. To be a Christian is to be a voice that can say "I know the man. I can announce that He is the way, and the truth, and the life."

John the Baptist was that first voice crying out in the wilderness, and this announcement, most importantly, was that the way of the Lord must be prepared. ***"Prepare the way of the Lord."*** That's the title for Today's conference: Prepare the Way of the Lord. I want to consider this important theme of Advent, of preparation, as a development of one of the other great themes of Advent, which is waiting. Because preparation is not just a kind of absent waiting or vacant waiting; preparation is an active waiting, a getting ready for, a making room for what is to come. John the Baptist, the voice crying out in the desert, announced ***"Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight His paths."*** As the prophet Isaiah tells us, ***"Prepare a highway for our God."***

So what does this preparation look like? How is the way of the Lord prepared? Well, I'm going to suggest that there are three major aspects of the life of John the Baptist that we can look to. First, we can consider that John preached a baptism of repentance. Second, we can consider that he pointed always to Christ. That he declared not just ***"Prepare the way of the Lord,"*** but that ***"This is the Lamb of God."*** And finally, we can consider John the Baptist's personal disposition before Christ, his great humility, such that the man would say ***"I am not worthy to untie the straps of His sandals."***

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So, first, the baptism of repentance. Advent, as a time of preparation, is a time of penance. So, of course, the most obvious form of repentance for us Catholics is to make a worthy confession. Many parishes announce special Advent penance services, or offer days where confession is available all day. Allow your Advent confession to be a particular time of assessment of your soul. How are you preparing for Christ to come into your heart each day?

Of course, the graces of the sacrament are aided by regular prayer. If you're listening to this conference, you've already taken on the disposition, the duty, the special opportunity of enhancing your life in prayer during Advent. This can be complemented by undertaking works of charity. Many churches offer opportunities to be of service in a particular way during this season. Take advantage of it, take more ornaments than you usually would off the Advent Giving Tree, undertake other works of charity in an intentional way, do something for someone you know who needs a particular act of love.

It's a real penance to take the time, to use your means, to do this for Christ, to prepare the way for Him so that this other soul can more readily experience Christmas, so that this other soul might know Christ's coming more clearly. Finally, don't be afraid to take on some element of fasting. Deprive yourself of something this Advent. Make your soul ready. Prepare the way by announcing the baptism of repentance that John preached, turning again and again to the Lord, who is coming.

John the Baptist's second great role, the second great thing that he teaches us in his life and the gospels is this disposition of pointing always to Christ. One beautiful artistic depiction of this that I love is Matthias Grünewald's *Crucifixion*. It was completed in 1515, and it was designed as part of an altarpiece in Alsace, in France. This particular painting, in which the suffering Christ is situated right in the middle - He's accompanied too by Mary Magdalene and Mary - and there, also in the scene of crucifixion, is John the Baptist. Now, of course, this is a mystical depiction of the crucifixion; John the Baptist was not there when Christ was crucified. At the Baptist's feet, the artist has placed a lamb, and the lamb carries in its arm a cross. It's John the Baptist who recognizes Jesus as the Lamb of God. "Behold the Lamb of God!" he cries out. He points to Him. And in this beautiful painting, he illustrates again that he, John, is a witness to the lamb who is going to be led into slaughter.

All of this is part of why the Protestant theologian Karl Barth loved the painting so much. He says that the church believes and recognizes God in Christ. "It can only look out of the darkness in the direction in which a human being is to be seen in a light, the source of which it cannot see itself." John the Baptist can only point.

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None of us is the light. Christ is the center of the painting, and all of us turn to Christ, saying “Behold the Lamb of God! Look to Him.”

Joseph Ratzinger once asked “In what does man’s wretchedness actually consist?” Ratzinger suggests that man’s wretchedness is loneliness, the absence of love. And I would propose alongside Ratzinger’s view that loneliness is daring to put oneself at the center of the painting, to have nothing else in one’s life to point to. This is what it means to lack communion, to lack the ability of beholding the Lamb of God.

C. S. Lewis talks about this in a really powerful way in his short story, *The Man born Blind*. In the story, the man born blind can’t see, and then he undergoes a surgery I think, I can’t remember. There’s some kind of circumstance and he’s now able to see. Lewis asks in the story what it would be like for someone who previously had not been able to see to learn what light is, and he has this great dialog where the man is asking “What is the light?” So the dialog includes lines like “Can you see it? Where is it?” “Why, it’s all around us,” the person asserts to the formerly blind man. And then the man goes around and he asks “Is it the table? Is it the lightbulb?” And the person who’s always been able to see keeps insisting “It’s all around us. It’s the light.”

We have to be cognizant, as we prepare the way, that there are people who lack the ability to just point to Christ and say “This is the Lamb of God.” People who can’t turn to the crucifix and say “I know what that sacrifice means.” It’s like a blind man who’s not been able to see light. Part of the Christian vocation and preparing the way is having a confidence that “I know who the Lamb is. I know the way that people have to take to follow Him. I can behold Him, I can spot Him, I can point to Him and, with my own life, I can magnify who He is.”

The Second Vatican Council announces in an extraordinary way this need for communion. In the document *Gaudium et spes*, the Council Fathers proclaim: “The dignity of man rests above all on the fact that he is called to communion with God. This invitation to converse with God is addressed to man as soon as he comes into being. For if man exists it is because God has created him through love, and through love He continues to hold him in existence. He cannot live fully according to the truth unless he acknowledges that love and entrusts himself to his creator.”

To acknowledge the love we were made for, the communion that every human heart desires, to be able to reach out to God, to behold Him, is to know that Christ is the Lamb. That our truest self is revealed in our communion with Him by our being able to point to Christ and to say “I know Him, and I love Him, and I am with Him.” To prepare the way, then, for Christ is to help others to be able to see this, to give them this invitation, this kind of response to the deepest yearning of

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our human hearts. Finally, the last great act of John the Baptist, after his preaching of the baptism of repentance, after his pointing to the Lamb of God, is the demonstration of his own personal virtue, of his great humility, his saying before Christ ***“I am not worthy to untie the straps of His sandals.”***

Aquinas tells us that humility is necessary to pursue difficult goods, because humility tempers and restrains the mind, lest otherwise the mind tend to high things immoderately. The virtue of humility is that which allows us to pursue, in a reasonable way, what is ours. Humility is a kind of self-knowing, the recognition of who Christ really is in the life of the believer, and announcing one’s lowliness in a way that entrusts all to Him. Humility is a kind of self-knowledge and, for the believer, it always means recognizing who Christ is. I have not righted the world by my death and resurrection. I have not been able to announce that each baptized Christian is in a dynamic communion with the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This is something only the Son can announce, and John the Baptist sees that and knows that, and proclaims ***“I am not worthy to untie the straps of His sandals.”***

In the Mass, St. Francis of Assisi is able to see the extraordinary humility of Christ, of the living God. The extraordinary desire of Christ to humble Himself for our salvation, hiding Himself even, as Francis puts it, under a morsel of bread. John the Baptist sees this great humility of Christ and exemplifies it, embraces it, makes it his own in his own virtue. ***“I am not worthy to untie the straps of His sandals,”*** the great John the Baptist says.

In the life of John the Baptist, we see something more than a prophet. The Catechism asserts that the Holy Spirit concludes His speaking through the prophets, and John completes this cycle by offering something even more than the prophets knew. Something greater than Elijah is here, we might say. John comes to bear witness to Christ, to bear witness to the light, to be the voice that cries out in the wilderness, to be the one who says that this Christ, this Christ is to be known and loved, and that the way for Him must be prepared.

With John the Baptist, then, let us recommit ourselves to the need for repentance this Advent, that we might do penance to prepare the way, that we might have a confidence in our need and our invitation to point always to Christ, that we might live in communion with Him. And to take on in ourselves a new desire to practice humility, that we can say with John the Baptist ***“I am unworthy to untie the straps of His sandals.”*** *All glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be. World without end. Amen. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*