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The Franciscan Legionnaire

Newsletter of the Friars Legion of St. Peter's Church in the Loop
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PREPARING THE WAY

Whenever we think about John the Baptist and his relation to Jesus, we do so in a simple and elegant way: John was Jesus' forerunner. John preached the coming of Christ, baptized Jesus at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, testified to Jesus, and died as a martyr, his own death being a kind of prophecy of Christ's death, just as his life had been a prophetic pointing to the arrival of the Messiah in Israel. Nearly two thousand years after both men lived, there is no other way to look at them, and it is a way of seeing the both of them that is strongly indicated by the New Testament, especially the first chapter of Luke's gospel, where we learn that John and Jesus had some kind of family relationship, and that John, even before his birth, acknowledged the presence of the Lord and pointed to it by his having leapt in his mother's womb at the moment Mary's greeting reached Elizabeth's ears (Lk 1:44).

As clear and unambiguous as this seems to be, the New Testament has a great many things to tell us about John the Baptist and his relationship to Jesus, and not all of it fits smoothly into our normal way of imagining the connection between a forerunner and the one before whom he runs. We assume, especially in the case of John and Jesus, that the forerunner is first on the scene and proclaims the coming of one he knows well. Thus, the stereotypical posture of the forerunner is that of looking both ahead and behind him – ahead in the proclamation of the arrival of one who is not yet made known to those to whom the forerunner makes his announcement, and behind in a kind of over-the-shoulder glance that has an eye peeled for the

actual appearance of the one whose coming he is proclaiming. If that were the only way of being a forerunner, however, we would have to disqualify John as the precursor of Jesus, or at least seriously question it, since the Scripture gives us plenty of evidence that suggests that it was not at all clear to John or to those around John that his ministry of preaching and baptizing had all been a forerunning of Jesus. In the end, and from the vantage point of the paschal mystery of Jesus, that is the only way to see John. But from the perspective of John at the beginning, when he was doing the work of preparing the way of the Lord, it was not so clear.

In the Acts of the Apostles 19:1-7 Luke gives us a brief account of something that happened to the apostle Paul in one of his trips to the city of Ephesus, which suggests strongly that John's significance was originally understood not as that of a forerunner but as that of a religious figure important in his own right. In Ephesus Paul encountered a dozen "believers" who had received John's baptism and cultivated John's message, but who knew nothing of Jesus, nor of baptism in Jesus' name, nor of the Holy Spirit that had been poured out on Christ's disciples. Paul had to instruct them in all of this, and only then did they receive both the Christian sacrament of baptism and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Clearly, this group in Ephesus (and there may well have been other such groups in other cities) did not see John as a forerunner of anyone. They only came to see him in this way once the message of Christ had been brought to them.

Moreover, the gospels preserve for us some words and actions of John that suggest that the

Baptist did not see his own work primarily in terms of a preparation for Jesus' coming. Indeed, Jesus seems to have been a puzzle to John. John did not immediately recognize who and what Jesus was, and even at the end of John's life, he had questions about Jesus. In Matthew 3:13-17, the account of Jesus' baptism by John in the Jordan, John initially refuses to baptize Jesus, saying "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" John's objection contains a recognition of Jesus' superiority to himself, but it also contains a hint of uncertainty about Jesus and about his own relationship to Jesus.

A much stronger and clearer doubt on John's part is recorded later on in the gospels. Matthew and Luke report that when John was in prison and not far from his execution by Herod, he dispatched messengers to Jesus with the question, "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?" (Lk 7:20). Jesus' response to the disciples of John is that they should take back to the imprisoned Baptist news of what they have seen: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. And then Jesus pronounces a blessing which, if meant for John as it seems to be, sounds quite strange to us: "And blessed is he who takes no offense at me" (Lk 7:23). John might be scandalized by Jesus? How could such a thing happen? How could we or anyone even think such a thing?

Yet if we just look at the messages of John and Jesus it is not hard to see how John might be confused by Jesus, and how he might regard Jesus' gospel as offensive and a stumbling block. To be sure, at first glance, John's and Jesus' preaching might seem to be the same.

Certainly they use the same religious vocabulary and the same religious ideas. John proclaims a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, and does so in an uncompromising and unyielding way. The salvation of God is on the way, and the only possible response of sinful humanity is the frank admission of its guilt, a complete change of life, and a turning toward God for forgiveness. The approach of God that John announces will overthrow the existing order completely – John's image here is of the axe that is laid to the root of the tree to bring it down. It will be a fiery judgment, a winnowing fork to separate wheat from chaff, and God will burn the useless straw with unquenchable fire.

In all this, John sounds very much like a prophet of old, and he is described in just those terms by all four evangelists.

Jesus in no way corrects or contradicts John. Jesus does not repudiate John's proclamation, nor does he cancel its validity. In many parables and sermons, Jesus speaks of the need for repentance and of the coming judgment of God in terms no less harsh and uncompromising that those that John had used. And yet there is a crucial difference in Je-

sus' gospel, one that John could not have failed to notice, for Jesus does not simply restate John's message. Jesus takes John's proclamation and integrates it into his own so that the call to repentance becomes the prelude to the advent of God's mercy.

The Kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus is not prophetic promise but the fulfillment of all the prophetic promises stretching back to Abraham. Jesus reveals himself as the only Son of the Father, the fullness of the Father's grace and love. In his very person is found the union of God and God's creation, God's perfect offer of himself and humanity's perfect acceptance of



that offer. The slow building up of this Kingdom in time and its appearance in glory at the end of time involves the transformation of the universe, a part of which is the destruction of all that is opposed to God's loving will. And so Jesus will necessarily speak of what must be overcome in terms very similar to those of John.

And yet as great as the similarity is between Jesus and John, the differences are even greater. Some of Jesus' parables sound like John's axe to the root of the tree and the winnowing fork in God's hand, but whereas this is pretty much all that John has to say, it is only the first part of what Jesus has to say. It is a necessary first part, but it is not the whole story, it is followed and completed by the Good News of the victorious achievement of God's salvation, and the confidence and joy that every believer must have as God's grace works a change in him and moves him towards that predestined end. John speaks with the voice of the all the prophets, a voice calling the people to repentance and warning them that all can yet be lost because of our sins and infidelity. Jesus speaks with a new voice and a new tone, calling the people to repentance because God's triumph has already begun in a way that cannot be defeated. Our sins are real and must be overcome, but they no longer pose a threat to God's salvific will, for in Jesus, a man like us in all things but sin, God's gift has been received at the fullest depths of the human heart, and there it has finally and definitively reconciled us to the Father.

When we place the messages of the two men side by side, we both see and feel that we are in the presence of two very different things. Jesus himself, in his words about John the Baptist, confirms our intuition and does so with words that, on first hearing, sound excessively harsh to the one who had labored so hard to prepare the way for his coming: "Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he" (Mt 11:11). Thus, Jesus draws a clear line between all that has gone before and the new thing that his own proclamation is

bringing to birth in the world, and he situates the Baptist on the far side of that line. So it is no wonder that John failed to recognize Jesus as the awaited one. Pointing the way to the Kingdom of God, John nevertheless stands outside it, confused about Jesus and uncertain as to what his work signifies. John, it turns out, has spent himself in preparing the way for one he does not know or recognize.

John's moment is not our moment, but in some ways we are like him. Unlike him, we can confess Jesus to be Lord and Christ without any doubt or hesitation. But like him we are forerunners, preparing the way for a future that is certain to take us by surprise and that, when it arrives, will leave us gasping for breath. As the apostle Paul writes in many of his letters, what we have now is not all that will be. In hope we await the coming of the Lord in glory, and as we do so we work on his behalf, striving always to live lives worthy of our calling. The Lord whose coming we look forward to is the same Lord who was born of the Virgin, who suffered and died for us, and who rose from the dead on the third day. We know him as sheep know their shepherd. And yet his coming in glory we do not know – our eyes have not seen it, our ears have not heard it, nor has it so much as dawned on our imagination what God has prepared for those who love him. In all this ignorance we are very much like John the forerunner. And like him, the reality that overtakes us, the thing we have been preparing ourselves and our world for, may not conform to our expectations; it may confuse us and perplex us, prompting us to send messengers from the prison our little lives are always becoming, inquiring whether this is it or should we keep on waiting.

Here and now we keep our proper vigil and make of all times an Advent time by admitting in all humility that everything, even that which we prize the most, is passing and provisional, already beginning to leave us even as we first greet it and welcome its arrival. We prepare the way for the day of the Lord by not clinging to the moment as if it were eternal or eternally valid, but by letting it go and waiting in hope.

—Fr. Bob Sprott, O.F.M.



The Franciscan Friars and the staff of St. Peter's Church in the Coop wish you and your families a joyous Christmas and a happy New Year. We thank you for your support and look forward to serving you in the coming year.



APPLICATION FOR YEAR-LONG MEMORIAL CANDLE
(Please print, leaving a space between each word.)

To be lit in honor of:
 Living _____ Deceased _____

Requested by:

Date candle is to be lit: Immediately _____ Specific Date _____

The offering for the Memorial Candle is \$150.00. Please enclose a check for the full amount with this form.

APPLICATION FOR PERPETUAL ENROLLMENT IN THE FRIARS LEGION
(Please print, leaving a space between each word.)

Please Enroll:
 as a Perpetual Member of the Saint Peter's Friars Legion.
 Living _____ Deceased _____

Your Name:

Address:

City, State, Zip Code:

OFFERING: Individual, \$25.00 _____ Family, \$100.00 _____ *(Immediate family, parents and children)*