

VOICES FROM "BEYOND JORDAN AND THE LIMESTONE HILLS"

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C.Ss.R. looks at
the two great
figures at the
beginning
of the Christian
story: Jesus and
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The great Advent figure of John the Baptist

Two great figures stand at the beginning of the Christian story: Jesus and John the Baptist. All four evangelists witness to the truth that you cannot tell the story of Jesus without first speaking about John the Baptist. It is the towering figure of John that introduces the adult Jesus in all the Gospels. John worked no miracles, held no office and belonged to no religious party. Yet his importance for Jesus was unique: he stands as the only religious leader whom Jesus ever sought out and spoke of with deep affection and admiration. He is described as a voice crying in the wilderness, a large presence that dominates the emptiness of the wasteland.

In his poem "St John the Baptist", Sidney Keyes catches something of the place of John in sacred history:

*I, John, not reed but root;
Not vested priest nor saviour but a voice
Crying daylong like a cricket in the heat,
Demand your worship. Not for me
But for the traveller I am calling
From beyond Jordan and the limestone hills,
Whose runner and rude servant I am only.
Not man entirely but God's watchman,
I dwell among the blistered rocks
Awaiting the wide dawn, the wonder
Of His first coming, and the Dove's descent.*

God speaks again

John is a waiting figure, God's watchman, but his waiting is anything but passive. He does not go into the wilderness to sit in solitude and wait for the one who is to come; rather, the word of God invades his whole being, calling the people of Israel to a radical change of heart in readiness for the approach of the Lord. From the wilderness his voice has a powerful reach: it attracts a people who have grown accustomed to the silence of God, a people who are hungry to be nourished again by the word which they recognise to be God's own word.

It is worth noting that since the death of the last of the writing prophets, the voice of God had not been heard in the land. It was believed that the spirit of prophecy had been quenched and that God spoke only through "the echo of his voice". That long silence is broken when John speaks, and this is what gives John his unique authority. Through him the silence of God is ended: the spirit of prophecy is alive again as it was in the days of old. That is why, as Mark says, all Judaea and all Jerusalem make their way to John: in him the people discern the living word of God.

Mark's Gospel begins with a pilgrimage leaving sacred space – the holy city of Jerusalem and the Temple – and travelling out to the wilderness to listen to John the Baptist. Pilgrimages usually leave ordinary space and go to sacred space. But, for Mark,

sacred space is the place of leaving, not of arrival; a new destination is appealing to people. And it is not another sacred place to which people travel; it is a sacred person. Jesus asked the question: "What did you go out to the wilderness to see?" There is nothing to see in the wilderness except hard rock and sky. The destination of the pilgrims is not a place but a person: the prophet who speaks the word of God and holds out an opportunity to begin again.

With John, everyone has a chance to begin again

Some people think of John as a stern, unbending character – the wild man of the wilderness who dresses in animal skin and follows a strange diet. John lives an ascetic lifestyle in the wilderness whereas Jesus, by comparison, goes through the streets and villages and towns, bringing his message to where people live. Yet both leaders are criticised: because of his habit of open table fellowship, Jesus is accused of being a glutton and a drunkard; because of his ascetic way of life, John is accused of being possessed.

Yet the extraordinary thing is that John the Baptist attracted people who would not be regular attenders of Temple worship – people who were not hungry for liturgy – like tax collectors and soldiers and prostitutes. With John they saw a chance to begin again and make a new start in their lives. When Jesus criticises the chief priests and elders he says: "I tell you solemnly, tax collectors and prostitutes are making their way into the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you, a pattern of true righteousness, but you did not believe him, and yet the tax collectors and prostitutes did. Even after seeing that, you refused to think better of it and believe in him" (Matthew 21:31-32).

For Jesus, the power of John's ministry is witnessed by how he helped to change the lives of tax collectors and prostitutes who believed in him; his ministry is told in the biography of outsiders, and when the chief priests and elders saw that for themselves they still did not believe in John. John can help people begin again. With John, everyone has a new future open to them.

People respond to the revivalist preaching of John by confessing their sins and undergoing a baptism of repentance. To the word of God spoken through John, people give their own word to change their lives. Their change of heart is shown in their public baptism, which would have taken place at one of the fords in the river Jordan. John's baptism marks a new beginning for them, a time of personal spiritual renewal, when they would aim themselves again at a life of fidelity to God.

Fostering greatness in others

The purpose of this energetic renewal movement is to prepare for the one who is to come. And we know that "one" to be Jesus of Nazareth. Although John has his own group of disciples, he does not make himself the focus of his prophetic witness; he does not claim that he is the way, the truth and the life. "Someone is following me, someone who is more powerful than I am, and I am not fit to kneel down and undo the strap of his sandals." John understands his own powerful place within the larger context of God's plan and this frees him to defer to the one who will baptise with the Holy Spirit. Jesus' greatness does not diminish John's importance; John is important precisely because of who Jesus is.

John's way is a challenge to all of us: to foster the greatness in others without feeling threatened about the value of our own contribution; to be free to celebrate the importance of others because we have a sense of our own worth and value before God. John manages to do all this, and, not surprisingly, Jesus will return the compliment when he speaks about John to the crowds, telling them that there is no greater mother's son than John the Baptist.

As the relationship between John and Jesus teaches us, the generosity in recognising the goodness in others can help them to call out the good that is in ourselves. When that happens, there are no losers.

Fr Denis McBride's many CDs, DVDs and books are available from Redemptorist Publications, www.rpbooks.co.uk

Sharing

I am struck by how sharing our weakness and difficulties is more nourishing to others than sharing our qualities and successes. There is a fundamental tendency to become discouraged in community. We either believe that others are better than we are, or they don't have to cope with the same problems. The discovery that we are all in the same boat and all have the same fears and weariness, can help us to continue. People are nourished by humility, because humility is truth.

Jean Vanier, Community and Growth, P.185