

ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST

By KEVIN SMYTH

OF Abraham, the father of our faith, St. Paul wrote: 'In hope he believed against hope'. Called to be the father of many nations, Abraham found the promise seemingly belied by his own advanced age and the barrenness of Sarah, his wife. 'He never doubted God's promise, but, strong in faith, gave glory to God: in the firm conviction that whatsoever God has promised, he is able also to perform'. That is why, St. Paul continues, 'His faith was counted to him as justice'. It was by such a faith, strong when its promises seemed futile, that Abraham became 'the father of us all'.¹

The Advent Liturgy puts John the Baptist before our eyes at a moment of his life when he, like Abraham, was beset by temptation, by a challenge to his faith. The crisis was real, and terrible enough to make his steadfastness a true victory, which could be reckoned to him also as righteousness. For we must consider that without a real trial there could have been no worth-while triumph; without doing violence, John the Baptist could not have carried off the prize of the Kingdom of God. The Gospel of the Mass for the second Sunday of Advent describes John's moment of trial:

'When John had heard in prison the works of Christ, sending two of his disciples, he said to him: Art thou he that art to come, or look we for another? And Jesus making answer said to them: Go and relate to John what you have heard and seen. The blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he that shall not be scandalized in me'.²

This is a passage at which many a reader has taken offence. It suggests that the Baptist himself had taken offence and faltered. Having once acclaimed Jesus, had he begun to doubt? We cannot take the easy way out, and say that the Evangelist is merely making John the spokesman for the questioning people. The question is also in Luke's gospel; and after his lyrical opening chapter on John, Luke could not have reduced the Baptist to the level of the crowd.

¹ Rom 4,14-22.

² Mt 11,2-6; cf. Lk 7,18-23.

And neither can St. Matthew have identified him with the fickle moody crowd which the Evangelist describes in the same chapter. John would be a most unsuitable spokesman for Everyman. According to St. Matthew's gospel, John had recognised Jesus at once, when he came to the Jordan to be baptized by John. 'John stayed him, saying: I ought to be baptized by thee, and comest thou to me?'¹ This was a confession that Jesus was the Messias. To whom else could John feel inferior, when he had proclaimed the coming of one 'mightier than I'? And who could the Mighty One be but the Messias, he who in the strength of God was to destroy the kingdom of the evil one? Jesus was to say this of himself: 'How can one enter into the house of the strong and rifle his goods, unless he first bind the strong?' Or again, the force of John's objection may be felt by considering his request for baptism. 'John knew the baptism which he himself was sent to give, and the baptism to be given by Christ in the Holy Spirit. When therefore he says, 'I ought to be baptized by thee', he is professing that Jesus is the person of whom he had said, 'He will baptize you in the Holy Spirit and fire' . . . Baptism begins and consecrates a new order of things. John's prepared it, Christ's brought it. To think of a third baptism was impossible to John. Hence his words, 'I need thy baptism', show that he had recognised Jesus as the Christ.'²

Not that the real point of this preliminary encounter of Jesus and John is the recognition. The first gospel is intent only on Jesus' answer: 'Suffer it to be so now. For so it becometh us to fulfil all justice'. That the Christ, the Son of God, should have undergone like any sinner a 'baptism of repentance unto the remission of sins' caused some repugnance in the early Church. There was a full answer ready in St. Paul, who could say: 'Him who knew not sin, God hath made sin for us, that we might be made the justice of God in him.'³ This contains no shred of doubt about Christ's sinlessness. But it brings out clearly what is implied in the descent of Christ among sinners into the Jordan, namely, that God made Christ one with our sinful race. Or, as the New English Bible reads, 'Christ was innocent of sin, and yet for our sake God made him one with the sinfulness of men.' St. Matthew, thinking only of the sinlessness of Christ, had a simpler answer to his readers' question. 'Let the baptism take place now. For it is our duty to do all that God commands'. The Evangelist does not reflect here on the deeper 'why' of God's command, any

¹ Mt 3,14.² Knabenbauer, *In Matthaeum*, I, 135.³ 2 Cor 5,21.

more than he is interested in how John could recognize Jesus at such an early stage. He merely propounds a direct and simple *apologia* for Jesus' baptism, the will of God, and puts it in the form of a dialogue. But whatever the main interest of the scene, the Evangelist leaves no doubt that John knew Jesus from the start. And when at Jesus' baptism he reports the words from heaven in the form, 'This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased', he certainly includes John in the public so addressed. It is in the light of John's knowledge of Jesus the Messiah that in the eleventh chapter the Evangelist asks us to read about John's messengers.

They are disciples of John, who have remained loyal to him while he is in prison. They have been witnesses of 'the works of Christ', of his preaching, that is, as well as his miracles. They have brought to John the news of Jesus' triumphs. And John is baffled. He still asks: 'Are you really the Messiah, or are we to go on waiting for a Messiah? And we are perhaps baffled by the mentality of John. The 'works of Christ', to which Jesus referred John in his answer, the works which were to answer John's question, were none other than those of which John already knew! With what John had learned of Jesus at the baptism, with what John had heard of Jesus' preaching and miracles, how could he delay to re-affirm his allegiance to Jesus?

To understand John's role in the gospels, we must recognise that he is really going through a dark hour. The scene is not without an element of the tragic. Tragedy implies unwitting self-destruction or self-punishment; and here is how it came about with John. He had in his mind a picture of the Messiah which was authentically that of the prophets of the Old Testament. But in John's picture there was an extra element, which must have heightened the conflict in the mind of the captive in Herod's dungeon: the moment of liberation had arrived. For John, as for the ancient prophets, the Messiah was bringer of doom as well as of salvation. He was to liberate the children of Abraham; but he was also to execute judgement upon sinners. John's own words about the Christ ran: 'He that comes after me, the mighty one, he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand. He will clear his threshing-floor and gather the wheat into his granary. But the chaff he will burn unquenchable fire'.¹

This picture of the Messiah as agent at once of God's rewards and

¹ Mt 3,11-12.

God's punishment reflects Old Testament prophecy: 'A shoot shall come forth from the stock of Jesse, and a branch shall arise from his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord, and he shall be filled with the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge only by what his eyes see, nor shall he reprove only for what his ears hear; but he shall judge the poor with justice, and shall reprove with equity on behalf of the meek of the earth'. Thus far the Messiah is described as the bearer of good things. But the prophet goes on: 'And he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked'.¹ And Joel (to take another prophet at random) had similarly described the great and terrible day of the Lord: 'Multitudes, multitudes, in the valley of decision! For the day of the Lord is near in the valley of decision. The sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars have withdrawn their shining. And the Lord shall roar from Zion, and utter his voice from Jerusalem, and the heavens and the earth shall be moved'. Thus far, the coming of God is described as catastrophic for sinners. And the prophet goes on: 'But the Lord shall be a refuge for his people, and a fortress for the children of Israel. You shall know that I am the Lord your God, dwelling in Zion, my holy mountain. Jerusalem shall be holy, and strangers shall pass through it no more'.² Thus, in the end, the Messiah, as spearhead of the God of battles, was expected to bring in simultaneously a day of peace and undimmed holiness and riches for the just, and a day of terror, vengeance and destruction for sinners. 'His fan is in his hand', said the Baptist, 'he gathers his wheat into his barn, he burns the chaff'.

How disconcertingly different were the 'deeds of Christ' from the career which John, under prophetic inspiration, had mapped out for the Messiah! The actual course of events, as told to John by his disciples, seemed to belie the picture which he had drawn of 'the Mighty One'. Where was the baptism of fire in which the menacing figure of the executioner was to consume sinners? Where too was the joyous acclaim which should have greeted the Deliverer among his people, Israel? How could his 'manifestation to Israel' be so unimpressive? Who could report, from the lips of Jesus himself, a public, unambiguous proclamation of his Kingship? The most remarkable thing that John had heard, the messianic deed which

¹ Isai 11,1-4.

² Joel 3,14-17.

came as the climax of Jesus' own account of himself, was: 'The poor have the good news preached to them'.

And what did this entail but a seeming contradiction of John's own message? There was no sifting of the chaff from the wheat, on the lines which John had laid down. The good news, brought to the lowly, was that their sins were being forgiven them, not punished. Instead of casting out sinners, Jesus was mingling with them familiarly and constantly, so much so that the righteous in Israel were taking offence. 'This man receives sinners and eats with them'.¹ Such was the reproach against his 'ministry of reconciliation'² which Jesus had to answer in many parables. He met the objection by the parable, for instance, of the weeds which were suffered to grow among the corn, by the parable of the prodigal son, by the parable of the workers in the vineyard; where rewards were distributed not strictly according to the laws of justice, but richly according to the goodness of God.

In other words, Jesus had come to offer God's merciful forgiveness, not to impose the sanctions of God's justice. It seemed to John the Baptist to be less than the work of the Messias. Why? Because, like the ancient prophets, he saw the Kingdom of God as simultaneous grace and wrath. He saw, as we should say nowadays, the first and second Coming merged into one. By a shortening of the prophetic perspective, the far, true and inevitable day of judgement was seen as immediately one with the 'Year of Grace'.³ John's vision was a true one, but not all the details and their proportions had been revealed clearly. It was not his 'to know the times or moments, which the Father hath put in his own power'.⁴ He did not see the precise way in which the last days would unfold themselves: as the days of the tender stretching forth of God's hands, through the healing and forgiving hands of Jesus, laid upon all who would submit to them, to heal every wound of the heart.

It would be unfair to John, and in conflict with the praises immediately heaped on him by Jesus, to think that he had actually taken scandal at Jesus' way. How could John have lost faith, when Jesus was to say of him, summing up: 'There is none born of woman greater than John the Baptist — a prophet and more than a prophet'?⁵ But we must do him the honour of crediting him with a Gethsemani. His hour of temptation was more than a physical trial. As the author

¹ Lk 15,2.

² Cf. 2 Cor 5,18.

³ Isai 61,2; Lk 4,19.

⁴ Acts 1,7.

⁵ Mt 11,9.

of the Epistle to the Hebrews says of Jesus, 'He has suffered and been tempted'.¹ The physical suffering is one thing, the temptation which tugs at the heart, as the opening scenes of Matthew and Luke show, is another. John's question, like Our Lord's prayer in the Garden, was wrung from his real spiritual anguish.

Many commentators have seen in John's question a mere pedagogical device, for the better instruction of his messengers and disciples. But it was surely a sincere appeal, asking for a better explanation than he could give himself, for a fuller light than he could gain from his own prophetic gift. He begged for the revelation which was to come only from Christ himself: that the Messiah was sent not to call the just but sinners; that God's fatherly love, incalculably shown in Jesus, was infinitely beyond human expectation. Christ gave the answer in words sufficiently clear. The poor hear the good news that their sins are forgiven.

The Baptist had not allowed himself to make shipwreck of his faith, in spite of the way in which Jesus' activity clashed with John's programme for the Messiah. But we must also note how clearly the prophet stands out from the people. They, were ready to go only a certain distance.² They might pronounce Jesus a prophet, a Jeremias, or even an Elias, wonder-worker and herald of the Day of the Lord. But they were not prepared to give him their whole-hearted allegiance as the definitive agent of God's salvation. They refused to recognise in him the Kingdom of God, the hope of Israel. To say the least, Jesus was no man, in their eyes, to strike terror into the hearts of Israel's oppressors, to 'stand and rule in the strength of the Lord, in the Majesty of the name of the Lord his God, to be great unto the ends of the earth'.³ In contrast to the questioning people, John only wanted confirmation from Jesus' lips of his first hope. His faith had not failed, and he was ready to confirm his brethren.

To many, all through the ages, it has seemed strange that John should have needed such confirmation. But is it so strange that John's vision, which embraced the future, and saw the future pivoted on Jesus, could still be limited and obscure? Did not St. Peter, having received from the Father the revelation that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the Living God, still bridle at the revelation that the Christ was to suffer and be killed?⁴ May we not say that if there was a fault in John the Baptist, it was a fault more of the heart than of the head? St. Ambrose weighs the opinion that John, 'the Loving

¹ Heb 2,18.

² Cf. Mt 16,14; Mk 6,14-18.

³ Mic 5,4.

⁴ Mt 16,13-22.

Prophet', had believed in him that was to come, but had not believed that he was to come to his death. 'He doubted therefore, not in his faith, but in his love'.¹ A lapse due to love, says St. Ambrose, does not injure faith. Or, to put it perhaps more correctly, if John had foreseen and desired a more meteoric and triumphant a career for the Messiah whom he had announced, what was that but the darkness of faith, not the loss of faith?

The contrary opinion, that John could never have a moment's trouble, seems to stem from the idea that John had been 'confirmed in grace' enjoying a perpetual illumination not far short of the beatific vision. This seems to go back to a mis-reading of the first chapter of St. Luke, which describes the nativity of John. 'He was filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb'.² But we must not read too much into this. It does not say, for instance, that he was freed then from original sin, any more than this is true of Elisabeth when 'she was filled with the Spirit'.³ Nor does it mean that John was endowed with the use of reason from the start, though Elisabeth can say with poetic hyperbole that 'the infant in my womb leaped for joy'. John was led along special paths to the place and hour of his 'manifestation to Israel'. His dedicated youth, his abstinence, his austerity, his retirement into the desert,⁴ were all gifts of the Holy Spirit; just as later the Gospel says of Jesus: 'the Spirit drove him out into the desert'.⁵ When St. Luke reports of John that he 'was filled by the Spirit', he means that the gift of prophecy was bestowed upon John⁶. Sanctifying grace is not mentioned, though it is not of course excluded. But when we are told that the gift was with John 'from his mother's womb', we are reminded that John's whole existence had no other direction or meaning than to be a pointer to Christ.

The fourth gospel also paints the testimony of John to Jesus in such glowing colours that it might seem to leave no place for a crisis or a conflict in the mind of John.⁷ We hear him cry out about Jesus: 'He ranks before me, because he was before me. He is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world. Upon him did the Spirit, as I saw, descend and remain. He is the Son of God. He will baptize with the Holy Spirit. My great and only joy is to see his splendour rising and dominating all.' This is no uncertain trumpet. But we must allow for the special approach of the fourth gospel, which has

¹ PL 14,1662-3.

² Lk 1,15.

³ Lk 1,41.

⁴ Lk 1,15-17; 2,80.

⁵ Mk 1,12.

⁶ Cf. Lk 1,41,67; Acts 2,4; 4,8 etc.

⁷ Jn 1,6-8; 3,22-30.

no interest in the personal history of John, much less in his psychological struggles. The Evangelist is merely taking the total effect of John's divinely-ordained career as precursor, and translating it emphatically in terms of 'testimony to Jesus'. The Evangelist himself was surely among those disciples of John who went over to Jesus because 'John bore testimony to the light'.¹ No wonder then that he gives a picture of John which reflects his own gratitude to the man who existed only to be 'for' Jesus, whose whole existence was concentrated in testifying to Jesus.

However, neither St. Luke nor St. John tells us that the Baptist walked by vision rather than by Faith;² and in the life of Faith there is room for difficulties. 'Hope, if it were something visible, would not be hope', said St. Paul.³ This means that our hopes are not always sustained, soothed and promoted by every circumstance. On the contrary, it must mean that our human ideas may have to be reviewed, our human impatience calmed and corrected. To use an over-worked phrase, agonising re-appraisal may often be called for.

If we find it hard to admit that John the Baptist had to curb his impatience and rectify his plans, we should perhaps think of the Apostles. They were greater men than the prophets, and being in the Kingdom of God, greater in knowledge than John. But neither were they confirmed in grace to such an extent that all human weakness was impossible. We see St. Paul, after his vision of Christ on the road to Damascus, falling into a fury with Barnabas,⁴ or wondering 'had he run in vain'⁵ – though he *knew* that he had not. According to St. Paul, St. Peter in his behaviour at Antioch was 'acting insincerely',⁶ a fault of behaviour, not a defect in his preaching, as Tertullian puts it.⁷ And this was after their respective Pentecosts. And we see the apostolic Church of Jerusalem, when it came to receiving Gentiles into one community with Jewish Christians, groping its way, uncertain as to procedures and timing.

The prophetic gifts of John were less than the gifts granted to the apostles. To the apostles Christ said: 'Many prophets and just men have desired to see what you see, and have not seen it'.⁸ And not only was the prophetic gift less than the light of the New Testament; it was itself a transient, not an abiding light. One recalls how the prophet Jeremias could complain, in hours of despondency, when his unfulfilled predictions had made him a laughing-stock: 'O

¹ Jn 1,35–51.

² Cf. 2 Cor 5,7.

³ Rom 8,24.

⁴ Acts 15,39.

⁵ Gal 2,3.

⁶ Gal 2,13.

⁷ PL 2,474.

⁸ Mt 13,17.

Lord, thou hast deceived me, and I was deceived'.¹ When we have allowed for the dramatic emphasis, we are still left with a Jeremias who sees his own God-given mission as a mistake or an illusion. The parallel with the Baptist is unmistakable. And the tragedy is where it must be: in the mental conflict of two seeming certainties. Doubt or hesitation would be comparatively innocuous and manageable. But Jeremias was certain that God had spoken to him. And he was just as certain that the message had led him astray. In his effort to reconcile sheer fact with certain hope, he pleads for more light: 'How can this be what God revealed and intended?' John the Baptist likewise asks: 'How can what I see be the work of the Messiah and the fulfilment of my message and my hope?' Because *we* can see, in the light of the whole revelation, how the Mighty One could be so meek, how power could be perfected in infirmity, we must not minimize John's difficulty, nor exaggerate it into a doubt.

Jesus' last words to John, after describing his messianic work, were: 'Blessed is he that is not scandalized in me'. This may contain a delicate rebuke to John's impatience, if we are to think of him as committing the fault of an Elias, of which Augustine said: 'Our great fault is that we wish to see everything fulfilled in our own times'. But the warning not to take offence at Jesus' messianic work is couched in the generalized form of a 'Beatitude'; and there is no reason to think that it was originally addressed to John. On the contrary, there is every reason to think that in this Beatitude, Jesus' horizon did not take in the prison of Machaerus. For though the Gospel does not tell how John reacted to Jesus' words, it tells us how Jesus reacted to John's message. Turning to the crowds, he equivalently called John blessed and emphasised the reason why. It was no mere trifle, like a reed swaying in the wind, that drew the people to the desert, but the superhuman figure of John; no soft weakling, but an austere prophet, other-worldly in his strength and detachment from this world's comfort; no rank and file prophet even, but 'more than a prophet', the messenger sent by God before Christ, and thereby brought into the closest proximity to Christ. Concluding his praise of John, Jesus said, 'No human being has appeared on earth greater than John the Baptist'.²

This blessing upon John is a blessing for faith unshaken. And so John remains, like Abraham, a 'father of our faith'; that is, a model and inspiration. This is because all Christians can be tempted to

¹ Jer 20,7.

² Mt 11,11.

lose heart and hope; to think that their 'prayers are as dead letters', their work futile, their chosen way a mistake and a loss, their waiting, a waiting for Godot. There are married people who find themselves at an impasse, where affection between them, or between them and their children, has broken down, and no way out seems possible along the lines which the Church has laid down in the name of Christ. The temptation comes, to doubt that the Christian way can be God's way, to demand or invent another way. The religious too, and the priest, committed to a setting which they may find at times almost unbearable and feeling soured and frustrated, may ask themselves: Is all this really 'in Christ'? Or Christians can find themselves subjected to dangerous pressures from outside, especially in these days when the search for Church Unity sometimes appears as an effort to deprive the Catholic Church of her uniqueness. So much stress is laid – not always unjustly or maliciously – on those historical failures of Catholics which have left a permanent bad taste in the mouth, that a Catholic may be tempted to lose his perspective. He may ask wonderingly, can this Church of lethargy, imprudence and harshness really be the 'sign raised up for the nations', as the Vatican Council proclaimed the Church, in the words of the prophet Isaias.

The believer, bewildered perhaps but steadfast, must often wait like John for the better, truer light; a light which, paradoxically, is already his, even as John's knowledge of Christ was to be founded on the 'works of Christ' which he already knew. 'The least in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than John the Baptist'. These words of Jesus do not cancel out his praise for John. They do not belittle the Baptist's personal sanctity, his prophetic gifts, his huge accomplishment of preparing the world for Christ. But they remind us of the privileged status of Christians, including the richer helps, exterior and interior, which they enjoy. 'Illuminated, they have tasted the heavenly gift and been made partakers of the Holy Ghost; they have moreover tasted the good word of God and the powers of the world to come'.¹ With this manifestation of the Kingdom of God, the world to come, is combined the outward. 'The Church itself, because of its marvellous spread, its incomparable holiness and unfailing richness in all good gifts, because of its catholic unity and unconquerable stability, remains a mighty and perpetual motive of credibility and an irrefutable testimony to its own divine mission'.²

¹ Heb 6,4-5.

² Vatican Council, Sess. III, cap. 3.

This 'coming of Christ', for such it is, in the Resurrection and in the Church which lives in him, John the Baptist could not see. His situation, as Christ said, was inferior to ours. But his triumph was all the greater.

His triumph. Because the total impression of John, given for our instruction by the New Testament, is of joyful and serene hope. The words in which the fourth gospel presents John's final message¹ are those of a man 'rejoicing in hope'.² We read of John's disciples, reporting on the triumphal progress of Jesus: 'Rabbi, he who was with you beyond the Jordan, he to whom you bore witness, he is here baptizing and all the world is going after him. John answered: A man cannot receive anything, unless it be given him from heaven. You yourselves do bear me witness that I said I am not Christ but that I am sent before him. He that hath the bride is the bridegroom: but the friend of the bridegroom, who standeth and heareth him, rejoiceth with joy because of the bridegroom's voice. This my joy is therefore fulfilled. He must increase: but I must decrease'.³ What the Baptist means is this: No one can take anything unless it is granted him by God. Hence the striking success of Christ's mission is a sign of God's good pleasure in him. Further, the Baptist's disciples had the earlier testimony of John to go on. He never claimed to be more than a forerunner, and therefore his disciples must be ready to recognise and welcome the Event. Finally, Jesus' triumph could only be John's joy, because John's dedication, and the meaning of his life, was only to see that all went well with Jesus, just as the groomsman is there only to see that the marriage ceremony and celebrations go smoothly. 'This my joy is therefore fulfilled'. His joy was full because though his star was setting – 'I must decrease', another was rising – 'he must increase'; and the final joy had been imparted to John, and to the disciples whom he brought to Jesus. We hear already in John's words the note of final happiness of which Jesus spoke when he said: 'These things have I spoken to you, that my joy may be in you and your joy may be filled'.⁴

The Advent message which comes through the Baptist is three-fold. One aspect of it is that our faith and hope, as we await the last grand manifestation of Christ, may well endure shocks, but will none the less be steadfast. 'Blessed is he who is not scandalized in me'. The second is that our Christian joy, such as we hope to experience in a special way in the cult and prayers of Christmas, will be Christ's

¹ Jn 3,27-30.

² Rom 12,12.

³ Jn 3,25-30.

⁴ Jn 15,11; 16,24; 17,13.

own joy: 'My joy in you'.¹ It is an unshakeable delight in his eternal reign and glory. Our personal failures cannot affect it, our moments of desolation cannot dim it, because it is imparted to us in faith; and that divine, eternal joy gives us 'peace in believing'.² Thirdly, that joy has already come to a real and essential fulfilment. As the Baptist said, 'This my joy is fulfilled'. The Christian life is a warfare, but it is not a long anguish or nightmare. Christ has come, and he is always coming to us;³ and therefore we conquer, and 'do more than conquer, in him that loved us'.⁴ 'That voice is round us like a bursting sea',⁵ as the poet said, and we are glad that we hear the voice of the bridegroom.

¹ Jn 15,11.

² Rom 15,15.

³ Jn 15,28.

⁴ Rom 8,37.

⁵ Francis Thompson, *Epilogue to 'A Judgement in Heaven'*.