

Saint_Thomas_explains_the_Gospel_for_the_3rd_Sunday_of_Advent

And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent from Jerusalem priests and Levites to him, to ask him: Who art thou? And he confessed, and did not deny: and he confessed: I am not the Christ. And they asked him: What then? Art thou Elias? And he said: I am not. Art thou the prophet? And he answered: No. They said therefore unto him: Who art thou, that we may give an answer to them that sent us? What sayest thou of thyself? He said: I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Isaias. And they that were sent, were of the Pharisees. And they asked him, and said to him: Why then dost thou baptize, if thou be not Christ, nor Elias, nor the prophet? John answered them, saying: I baptize with water; but there hath stood one in the midst of you, whom you know not. The same is he that shall come after me, who is preferred before me: the latchet of whose shoe I am not worthy to loose. These things were done in Bethania, beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

ORIGEN; This is the second testimony of John the Baptist to Christ, the first began with, This is He of Whom I spoke; and ended with, He has declared Him.

THEOPHYL. Or, after the introduction above of John's testimony to Christ, is preferred before me, the Evangelist now adds when the above testimony was given, And this is the record of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem.

ORIGEN; The Jews of Jerusalem, as being of kin to the Baptist, who was of the priestly stock, send Priests and Levites to ask him who he is; that is, men considered to hold a superior rank to the rest of their order, by God's election, and coming from that favored above all cities, Jerusalem. Such is the reverential way in which they interrogate John. We read of no such proceeding towards Christ: but what the Jews did to John, John in turn does to Christ, when he asks Him, through His disciples, Are you He that should come, or look we for another?

CHRYS. Such confidence had they in John, that they were ready to believe him on his own words: witness how it is said, To ask him, Who are you?

AUG. They would not have sent, unless they had been impressed by his lofty exercise of authority, in daring to baptize.

ORIGEN; John, as it appears, saw from the question, that the Priests and Levites had doubts whether it might not be the Christ, who was baptizing; which doubts however they were afraid to profess openly, for fear of incurring the charge of credulity. He wisely determines therefore first to correct their mistake, and then to proclaim the truth.

Accordingly, he first of all shows that he is not the Christ: And he confessed, and denied not; but confessed, I am not the Christ. We may add here, that at this time the people had already begun to be impressed with the idea that Christ's advent was at hand, in consequence of the interpretations which the lawyers had collected out of the sacred writings to that effect. Thus Theudas had been enabled to collect together a considerable body, on the strength of his pretending to be the Christ; and after him Judas, in the days of

the taxation, had done the same. Such being the strong expectation of Christ's advent then prevalent, the Jews send to John, intending by the question, Who are you? to extract from him whether he were the Christ.

GREG. He denied directly being what he was not, but he did not deny what he was: thus, by his speaking truth, becoming a true member of Him Whose name he had not dishonestly usurped.

CHRYS. Or take this explanation: The Jews were influenced by a kind of human sympathy for John, whom they were reluctant to see made subordinate to Christ, on account of the many marks of greatness about him; his illustrious descent in the first place, he being the son of a chief priest; in the next, his hard training, and his contempt of the world. Whereas in Christ the contrary were apparent; a humble birth, for which they reproach Him; Is not this the carpenter's son? an ordinary way of living; a dress such as every one else wore.

As John then was constantly sending to Christ, they send to him, with the view of having him for their master, and thinking to induce him, by blandishments, to confess himself Christ. They do not therefore send inferior persons to him, ministers and Herodians, as they did to Christ, but Priests and Levites; and not of these an indiscriminate party, but those of Jerusalem, i.e. the more honorable ones; but they send them with this question, to ask, Who are you? not from a wish to be informed, but in order to induce him to do what I have said. John replies then to their intention, not to their interrogation: And he confessed, and denied not; but confessed, I am not the Christ.

And observe the wisdom of the Evangelist: he repeats the same thing three times, to show John's virtue, and the malice and madness of the Jews. For it is the character of a devoted servant, not only to forbear taking to himself his lord's glory, but even, when numbers offer it to him, to reject it. The multitude indeed believed from ignorance that John was the Christ, but in these it was malice; and in this spirit they put the question to him, thinking, by their blandishments to bring him over to their wishes.

For unless this had been their design, when he replied, I am not the Christ, they would have said, We did not suspect this; we did not come to ask this. When caught, however, and discovered in their purpose, they proceed to another question: And they asked him, What then? Are you Elias?

AUG. For they knew that Elias was to preach Christ; the name of Christ not being unknown to any among the Jews; but they did not think that our Lord was the Christ: and yet did not altogether imagine that there was no Christ about to come. In this way, while looking forward to the future, they mistook at the present.

And he said, I am not.

GREG. These words gave rise to a very different question. In another place, our Lord, when asked by His disciples concerning the coming of Elias, replied, If you will receive it, this is Elias. But John says, I am not Elias. How is he then a preacher of the truth, if he agrees not with what that very Truth declares?

ORIGEN; Some one will say that John was ignorant that he was Elias; as those say, who maintain, from this passage the doctrine of a second incorporation, as though the soul took up a new body, after leaving its old one. For the Jews, it is said, asking John by the Levites and priests, whether he is Elias, suppose the doctrine of a second body to be already certain; as though it rested upon tradition, and were part of their secret system. To which question, however, John replies, I am not Elias: not being acquainted with his own prior existence. But how is it reasonable to imagine, if John were a prophet enlightened by the Spirit, and had revealed so much concerning the Father, and the Only-Begotten, that he could be so in the dark as to himself, as not to know that his own soul had once belonged to Elias?

GREG. But if we examine the truth accurately, that which sounds inconsistent, will be found not really so. The Angel told Zacharias concerning John, He shall go before Him in the spirit and power of Elias. As Elias then will preach the second advent of our Lord, so John preached His first; as the former will come as the precursor of the Judge, so the latter was made the precursor of the Redeemer. John was Elias in spirit, not in person: and what our Lord affirms of the spirit, John denies of the Person: there being a kind of propriety in this; viz. that our Lord to His disciples should speak spiritually of John, and that John, in answering the carnal multitude, should speak of his body, not of his spirit.

ORIGEN; He answers then the Levites and Priests, I am not, conjecturing what their question meant: for the purport of their examination was to discover, not whether the spirit in both was the same, but whether John was that very Elias, who was taken up, now appearing again, as the Jews expected, without another birth. But he whom we mentioned above as holding this doctrine of a reincorporation, will say that it is not consistent that the Priests and Levites should be ignorant of the birth of the son of so dignified a priest as Zacharias, who was born too in his father's old age, and contrary to all human probabilities: especially when Luke declares, that fear came on all that dwelt round about them.

But perhaps, since Elias was expected to appear before the coming of Christ near the end, they may seem to put the question figuratively, Are you he who announces the coming of Christ at the end of the world? to which he answers, I am not. But there is in fact nothing strange in supposing that John's birth might not have been known to all. For as in the case of our Savior many knew Him to be born of Mary, and yet some wrongly imagined that He was John the Baptist, or Elias, or one of the Prophets; so in the case of John, some were not unacquainted with the fact of his being son of Zacharias, and yet some may have been in doubt whether he were not the Elias who was expected.

Again, inasmuch as many prophets had arisen in Israel, but one was especially looked forward to, of whom Moses had prophesied The Lord your God will raise up unto you a Prophet from the midst of you, of your brethren, like to me; to Him shall you hearken: they ask him in the third place, not simply whether he is a prophet, but with the article prefixed, Are you that Prophet? For every one of the prophets in succession had signified to the people of Israel that he was not the one whom Moses had prophesied of; who, like Moses,

was to stand in the midst between God and man, and deliver a testament, sent from God to His disciples. They did not however apply this name to Christ, but thought that He was to be a different person; whereas John knew that Christ was that Prophet, and therefore to this question, he answered, No.

AUG. Or because John was more than a prophet: for that the prophets announced Him afar off, but John pointed Him out actually present.

Then said they to him, Who are you? that we may give an answer to them that sent us. What say you of yourself?

CHRYS. You see them here pressing him still more strongly with their questions, while he on the other hand quietly puts down their suspicions, where they are untrue, and establishes the truth in their place: saying, I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness.

AUG. So spoke Esaias: the prophecy was fulfilled in John the Baptist.

GREG. You know that the only-begotten Son is called the Word of the Father. Now we know, in the case of our own utterance, the voice first sounds, and then the word is heard. Thus John declares himself to be the voice, i.e. because he precedes the Word, and, through his ministry, the Word of the Father is heard by man.

ORIGEN; Heracleon, in his discussion on John and the Prophets, infers that because the Savior was the Word, and John the voice, therefore the whole of the prophetic order was only sound. To which we reply, that, if the trumpet gives an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself for the battle? If the voice of prophecy is nothing but sound, why does the Savior send us to it, saying, Search the Scriptures? But John calls himself the voice, not that cries, but of one that cries in the wilderness; viz. of Him Who stood and cried, If any man thirst, let him come to Me and drink. He cries, in order that those at a distance may hear him, and understand from the loudness of the sound, the vastness of the thing spoken of.

THEOPHYL. Or because he declared the truth plainly, while all who were under the law spoke obscurely.

GREG. John cries in the wilderness, because it is to forsaken and destitute Judea that he bears the consolatory tidings of a Redeemer.

ORIGEN; There is need of the voice crying in the wilderness, that the soul, forsaken by God, may be recalled to making straight the way of the Lord, following no more the crooked paths of the serpent. This has reference both to the contemplative life, as enlightened by truth, without mixture of falsehood, and to the practical, as following up the correct perception by the suitable action. Wherefore he adds, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Esaias.

GREG. The way of the Lord is made straight to the heart, when the word of truth is heard with humility; the way of the Lord is made straight to the heart, when the life is formed upon the precept.

ORIGEN; The questions of the priests and Levites being answered, another mission comes from the Pharisees: And they that were sent were of the Pharisees. So far as it is allowable to form a conjecture from the discourse itself here, I should say that it was the

third occasion of John's giving his witness. Observe the mildness of the former question, so befitting the priestly and levitical character, Who are you? There is nothing arrogant or disrespectful, but only what becomes true ministers of God.

The Pharisees however, being a sectarian body, as their name implies, address the Baptist in an importunate and contumelious way. And they said, Why baptize you then, if you be not that Christ, neither Elias, neither that Prophet? not caring about information, but only wishing to prevent him baptizing. Yet the very next thing they did, was to come to John's baptism. The solution of this is, that they came not in faith, but hypocritically, because they feared the people.

CHRYS. Or, those very same priests and Levies were of the Pharisees, and, because they could not undermine him by blandishments, began accusing, after they had compelled him to say what he was not. And they asked him, saying, Why baptize you then, if you are not the Christ, neither Elias, neither that Prophet? As if it were an act of audacity in him to baptize, when he was neither the Christ, nor His precursor, nor His proclaimer, i.e. that Prophet.

GREG. A saint, even when perversely questioned, is never diverted from the pursuit of goodness. Thus John to the words of envy opposes the words of life: John answered them, saying, I indeed baptize with water.

ORIGEN; For how would the question, Why then baptize you, be replied to in any other way, than by setting forth the carnal nature of his own baptism?

GREG. John baptizes not with the Spirit, but with water; not being able to remit sins, he washes the bodies of the baptized with water, but not their souls with pardon. Why then doth he baptize, when he doth not remit sins by baptism? To maintain his character of forerunner. As his birth preceded our Lord's, so doth his baptism precede our Lord's baptism. And he who was the forerunner of Christ in His preaching, is forerunner also in His baptism, which was the imitation of that Sacrament. And withal he announces the mystery of our redemption, saying that He, the Redeemer, is standing in the midst of men, and they know it not: There stands one among you, whom you know not: for our Lord, when He appeared in the flesh, was visible in body, but in majesty invisible.

CHRYS. One among you. It was fitting that Christ should mix with the people, and be one of the many, showing every where His humility. Whom you know not; i.e. not, in the most absolute and certain sense; not, who He is, and whence He is.

AUG. In His low estate He was not seen; and therefore the candle was lighted.

THEOPHYL. Or it was, that our Lord was in the midst of the Pharisees; and they not knowing Him. For they thought that they knew the Scriptures, and therefore, inasmuch as our Lord was pointed out there, He was in the midst of them, i.e. in their hearts. But they knew Him not, inasmuch as they understood not the Scriptures. Or take another interpretation. He was in the midst of them, as mediator between God and man, wishing to bring them, the Pharisees, to God. But they knew Him not.

ORIGEN; Or thus; Having said, I indeed baptize with water, in answer to the question, Why baptize you then? - to the next, If you be not Christ? he replies by declaring the

preexistent substance of Christ; that it was of such virtue, that though His Godhead was invisible, He was present to every one, and pervaded the whole world; as is conveyed in the words; There stands one among you.

For He it is, Who has diffused Himself through the whole system of nature, insomuch that every thing which is created, is created by Him; All things were made by Him. Whence it is evident that even those who inquired of John, Why baptize you then? had Him among them. Or, the words, There stands one among you, are to be understood of mankind generally. For, from our character as rational beings, it follows that the word exists in the center of us, because the heart, which is the spring of motion within us, is situated in the center of the body. Those then who carry the word within them, but are ignorant of its nature, and the source and beginning and the way in which it resides in them; these, hearing the word within them, know it not.

But John recognized Him, and reproached the Pharisees, saying, Whom you know now not. For, though expecting Christ's coming, the Pharisees had formed no lofty conception of Him, but supposed that He would only be a holy man: wherefore he briefly refutes their ignorance, and the false ideas that they had of His excellence. He said, stand; for as the Father stands, i.e. exists without variation or change, so stands the Word ever in the work of salvation, though It assume flesh, though It be in the midst of men, though It stand invisible.

Lest any one however should think that the invisible One Who comes to all men, and to the universal world, is different from Him Who was made man, and appeared on the earth, he adds, He that comes after me, i.e. Who will appear after me. The after however here has not the same meaning that it has, when Christ calls us after Him; for there we are told to follow after Him, that by treading in His steps, we may attain to the Father; but here the word is used to intimate what should follow upon John's teaching; for he came that all may believe, having by his ministry been fitted gradually by lesser things, for the reception of the perfect Word. Therefore he said, He it is Who comes after me.

CHRYS. As if he said, Do not think that every thing is contained in my baptism; for if my baptism were perfect, another would not come after me with another baptism. This baptism of mine is but an introduction to the other, and will soon pass away, like a shadow, or an image. There is One coming after me to establish the truth: and therefore this is not a perfect baptism; for, if it were, there would be no room for a second: and therefore he adds, Who is made before me: i.e. is more honorable, more lofty.

GREG. Made before me, i.e. preferred before me. He comes after me, that is, He is born after me; He is made before me, that is, He is preferred to me.

CHRYS. But lest you should think this to be the result of comparison, he immediately shows it to be a superiority beyond all comparison; Whose shoe latchet I am not worthy to unloose: as if He said, He is so much before me, that I am unworthy to be numbered among the lowest of His attendants: the unloosing of the sandal being the very lowest kind of service.

AUG. To have pronounced himself worthy even of unloosing His shoe's latchet, he would have been thinking too much of himself.

GREG. Or thus: It was a law of the old dispensation, that, if a man refused to take the woman, who of right came to him, to wife, he who by right of relationship came next to be the husband, should unloose his shoe. Now in what character did Christ appear in the world, but as Spouse of the Holy Church? John then very properly pronounced himself unworthy to unloose this shoe's latchet: as if he said, I cannot uncover the feet of the Redeemer, for I claim not the title of spouse, which I have no right to. Or the passage may be explained in another way. We know that shoes are made out of dead animals. Our Lord then, when He came in the flesh, put on, as it were, shoes; because in His Divinity He took the flesh of our corruption, wherein we had of ourselves perished. And the latchet of the shoe, is the seal upon the mystery. John is not able to unloose the shoe's latchet; i.e. even he cannot penetrate into the mystery of the Incarnation. So he seems to say: What wonder that He is preferred before me, Whom, being born after me, I contemplate, yet the mystery of Whose birth I comprehend not.

ORIG. The place has been understood not amiss thus by a certain person; I am not of such importance, as that for my sake He should descend from this high abode, and take flesh upon Him, as it were a shoe.

CHRYS. John having preached the thing concerning Christ publicly and With becoming liberty, the Evangelist mentions the place of His preaching: These things were done in Bethany beyond Jordan, where John was baptizing. For it was in no house or corner that John preached Christ, but beyond Jordan, in the midst of a multitude, and in the presence of all whom He had baptized. Some copies read more correctly Bethabara: for Bethany was not beyond Jordan, or in the desert, but near Jerusalem.

GLOSS; Or we must suppose two Bethanies; one over Jordan, the other on this side, not far from Jerusalem, the Bethany where Lazarus was raised from the dead.

CHRYS. He mentions this too for another reason, viz. that as He was relating events which had only recently happened, He might, by a reference to the place, appeal to the testimony of those who were present and saw them.

ALCUIN. The meaning of Bethany is, house of obedience; by which it is intimated to us, that all must approach to baptism, through the obedience of faith.

ORIG. Bethabara means house of preparation; which agrees with the baptism of Him, who was making ready a people prepared for the Lord. Jordan, again, means, "their crescent." Now what is this river but our Savior, through Whom coming into this earth all must be cleansed, in that He came down not for His own sake, but for theirs. This river it is which separates the lots given by Moses, from those given by Jesus; its streams make glad the city of God. As the serpent lies hid in the Egyptian river, so does God in this; for the Father is in the Son. Wherefore whosoever go thither to wash themselves, lay aside the reproach of Egypt, are made meet to receive the inheritance, are cleansed from leprosy, are made capable of a double portion of grace, and ready to receive the Holy Spirit; nor does

the spiritual dove light upon any other river. John again baptizes beyond Jordan, as the precursor of Him Who came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

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