Identity

Based on John 1:19-28

Preached on December 20, 2020

Fourth Sunday in Advent ~ Rorate Coeli

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I once lived in a very poverty stricken area of the US, just for summers as a vicar. And it’s easy enough to be a friendly guy, chummy and all that. But I found it very difficult to be so there. Because one of the most fundamental questions to ask someone you don’t know anything about is. “So what do you do?” But at that place, there were no jobs, no businesses, no factories. It was just a whole lot of people on welfare. Nobody, and I’m not exaggerating, nobody had jobs. It is very difficult, or maybe just different, to try to begin to understand who a person is, to start a conversation with someone who doesn’t do anything palpably productive from day to day. How can you know who someone is, apart from what they do?

Who are you? That is the question asked of John the Baptist by the priests. How do you answer that question. They knew his name, John. They knew he was himself a Levite like them, son of Zechariah the priest. That means he should be in the temple serving as a priest. But he’s in the wilderness preaching. They know that much, but still ask “Who are you?”.

In John’s case, he answers in the negative. I am not the Christ. In a sense, then, it is more important to John for people to know who he is not. He is not the messiah. He is not the saviour. He is not the person to go to to receive forgiveness and mercy. John preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, and so did jesus. But the difference is that John, while preaching a baptism of repentance did not preach a baptism of forgiveness.

There is an awesome truth we who are spoiled with the knowledge of loving, merciful, forgiving, indulgent God are hidden from. Like a child who gets his food, clothing and shelter every day from his parents just knows it will be the same tomorrow, so to we live in and under the grace and love of God, who loved us to death. But what if we knew of our sins, and we knew of a judge, but we didn’t know if he was merciful. It’s like being stranded out in the cold, going to a strangers door and knocking...not knowing who is there, whether they will help.

The best way to understand John the Baptist and who he is, is to understand that he doesn’t have any salvation to give, and he knows it, and he confesses, he does not deny, but confesses that he is not the Christ. There are two types of people that bother me in life, and for that I ask God’s forgiveness and patience. One type is the person who claims to know things, but when you ask them questions that expose their ignorance they get mad at you, or roll their eyes at you. The other is the person who raises wonderful philosophical questions that make you think deeply, but offers no answers. John is neither of those.

John is not an arrogant know it all, who doesn’t have to prove himself to nobody...in fact, he submits to and answers the priests questions. Neither is he someone who preaches a hopeless dilemma. He preaches a dilemma, but makes clear that there is no hope to be found from him.

John preaches a baptism of repentance, and for that he is the greatest mere mortal that ever lived. He doesn’t claim to have salvation to give what he preaches are the facts, as ugly as they are. He preaches that you all are sinners, and your works and deeds by nature are a stench in the nostrils of a righteous god. He preaches that for this, the wrath of God is not far off, or a myth. It is real and it is coming and frankly, you don’t stand a chance. You have nothing to shield you from it, appease it, misdirect it or to hide from it. “O mountains fall on us, O hills, cover us” will be the plea of those on the last day. They would rather be buried alive, than face the righteousness that is to be revealed in the day of the lord.

John is not arrogant, neither is he a teacher of hopelessness. Instead, he says he is not the christ, and he can’t save you. But he directs you to someone who can, to one the strap of whose sandals he is not worthy to untie. He points you to the saviour, Jesus Christ. He alone is the answer to the problem of sin. Not you, not John, nobody can atone for sins except he. And he is for you, and loves you, and prepares a place for you in heaven. For everyone who calls upon his name will be saved. He has healing and forgiveness for those who hide in the shadow of his wings, which have stretched out far pinioned to a cross beam of wood to cover us from the wrath to come, and to gather us into his body until the day he comes again.