

MENDHAM CSJB COMMEMORATION DAY, JUNE 25, 2016

Whenever I hear the passage from Isaiah, chapter 40, I am transported back across the years to CSJB in the UK; to the Chapel of St. John Baptist in the Sisters' vast Victorian mother house at Clewer. And the voice that I hear reading that passage is the voice of Sr. Olga. She was profoundly deaf, so much so that in order to have a conversation with her, I would have to write down what I wanted to say, and then, having read it, she would answer me. And when she read in chapel she would enunciate each word very slowly and carefully, and in doing so she transformed this lovely passage from Isaiah into something beautiful for God. But that wasn't all. I always felt she conveyed something else through her reading, and since I have been thinking and praying about what to say today, it suddenly struck me that it was humility. And this didn't surprise me because I believe humility to be one of the key characteristics of John the Baptist, along with courage.

In our Gospel reading we heard the familiar story of his birth, but today I want to think about the adult John. What was he really like? Well if, like me, you are a fan of 1960s Biblical epics, you might visualize John with the face of Michael York or Charlton Heston, kitted out in the best designer camel hair, his long hair carefully groomed. And such a character would be shaking his fist at the bewildered crowd and calling them a brood of vipers (which he did, of course, though it wouldn't have got him very far in the Church of England!). I think maybe he looked less like a film star and more like the Indian sadhu's, the so-called wandering 'holy men' whose wild appearance is rather scary. But we need to think away the Hollywood image and the wild man image and think about the man himself. And then we shall discover the real John – the man with a mission and a passion to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord, as prophesied by Isaiah in the passage we heard. There was an urgency to John's mission – time was running out – the Messiah was already here, though still unknown. And John's mission was not simply about repentance – what John was urging was *metanoia* – which is not just repentance but a complete turning of one's life around and turning back to God. It's rather like the Benedictine vow of **conversion of life**. But when Jesus came to John and presented himself for Baptism, St Matthew tells us that John said, “Do you come to me?” And Jesus replied, “Let it be so for now.” And there we have the real John who knew in that moment that his work was done, and who accepted it with humility. **Mission accomplished.**

There can be no doubt that John had **power**. Out there in the wilderness, the crowds flocked to him, hungry for his message and for a fresh start spiritually. He could

have clung to that power. He could have met Jesus with reluctance, resentment, especially when some of his own followers insisted that he (John) was the Messiah. He could have set himself up as a rival messiah with followers ready to support him. It would have been the **ultimate temptation**. And he resisted it. Not only did John resist that temptation, but he welcomed the coming of Jesus with joy. “For this reason my joy has been fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease,” And so it was. This was followed by his recognition of Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And therein lay the difference between Jesus the Messiah and John the Forerunner.

There was a strong bond between Jesus and John and when Jesus heard that John had received his martyrdom through the connivance of that evil woman Herodias and her gullible daughter Salome – when Jesus heard the news he went to a deserted place, all by himself, to pray and to grieve. But the crowd followed him. The fact that Jesus needed that time alone, even though it was cut short, shows just how much Jesus loved and valued John. I wonder whether at the last supper before his death, Jesus thought of John when he knelt before his disciples, untied their sandals and washed their feet. For John had declared his unworthiness to even untie Jesus’ sandals.

The ministry and testimony of John was remembered long after his death and there are three places in the Acts of the Apostles where he is mentioned. And this morning we heard Paul at Antioch in Pisidia, again proclaiming John’s humility. John’s Baptism had preceded not only the coming of Jesus, but also the spread of the good news to the earliest Gentile believers, as far away as Ephesus and Corinth.

So it is not difficult to understand why Harriet Monsell, the Mother Foundress of CSJB insisted that the new Community that she was establishing at Clewer should be under the patronage of St. John Baptist. The rector of Clewer, Thomas Thellusson Carter, co-Founder with Mother Harriet, was not at all keen on a male patron for a female Community. But Mother Harriet insisted and Carter relented – he didn’t always get his own way! But why should Mother Harriet insist on St. John Baptist as patron for the Community? The answer lies on the silver cross worn by all professed Sisters. There in the center of it is the symbol of the Lamb of God, first recognized by John in his humility, and proclaimed by Christians down the ages in the Mass.

But that’s not all of course. If you go outside and look at the Cornerstone there you will find (in Latin) John’s words again – “He must increase and I must decrease.”

Mother Harriet chose those words for her Sisters as the ideal to which they were called in living out their vowed life. And when in 1874, Sisters from Clewer came firstly to New York City, and then in 1915 here to Mendham, that same ideal came with them. It is the increasing of Christ within, and the decreasing of self and all that this implies. It is a very difficult ideal to live out because it requires the humility so ably shown in the life of St. John Baptist. And anyone who thinks they have humility probably hasn't. I am reminded of the novice monk at Nashdom Abbey in the UK about 30 years ago, who told his novice master that he only had one more degree of humility to attain. He left two days later!

But I do believe that the increasing of Christ within us and the decreasing of self, of selfishness, of self will and selfhood, is something that all Christians are called to strive towards, whether Religious, or clergy or laity. It is of course counter-cultural because it goes against the grain of so much in this 21<sup>st</sup> century that tries to tempt us away from living the Gospel. But John the Baptist was counter-cultural. It's what cost him his life. And so was Jesus, whose good news of the healing power of God's love was just too much for the political and religious leaders of his day. And in the 19<sup>th</sup> century on both sides of the Atlantic, Religious Sisters were also counter-cultural because they had the courage to break the accepted social conventions of their day. And humility too, many coming from distinguished family backgrounds. I believe they still are counter-cultural, because in the midst of this world's confusions what is so sorely needed is the voice of John the Baptist. A voice crying in the wilderness of this world, "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to them... and then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed. And he will feed his flock like a shepherd and gather the lambs in his arms..."

And so, we arrive where we started, with Sr. Olga reading those words so movingly. Mother Florence Teresa once said, "What God has done is the pledge of what God will do. We have history behind us." With St. John Baptist as an example and patron may we all have his courage, and may we learn from his humility, so that we may show the healing power of Christ's love amidst the world's temptations and confusions. Never in the whole of history was it needed more. Amen.