

Opening act

November 29, 2003

People who introduce themselves as bearing a message from God do not commend themselves to us easily. If we do turn an ear to them out of curiosity, or perhaps out of an amused and sometimes horrified fascination, they tend to wear out their welcome quickly. We have learned only too well that such self-styled messengers of God can carry out deeds of unimaginable ferocity in the name of their particular vision of God.

But does it follow that no messenger who claims to be from God can or should be given a hearing? We might recall the passion of Alexander Solzhenitsyn when he first came to the West from the Soviet Union. As had John the Baptist, Solzhenitsyn was formed in harsh and solitary places. The Siberian winds of the Gulag were as brutal in their frigidity as John's Middle Eastern desert was brutal in its heat. Both were places where life could hang by a thread. Both the Baptizer and Solzhenitsyn saw themselves as the bearers of a moral challenge to what they regarded as a tired and effete society. Both brought a stern and uncompromising style and substance. One returned to his homeland dispirited and humbled, no less sure of his convictions but defeated, not so much by an immoral West as by a place where the very idea of the moral had become a matter for discussion or contemptuous dismissal. The Baptizer knelt in the filth of Herod's dungeon to be butchered to satisfy a drunken royal whim.

Yet one person in particular accepted John's harsh style. One person admired his tenacity and single-mindedness, someone whose opinion we cannot lightly dismiss. Jesus not only welcomed John's ministry, he gave it the highest praise. "I tell you," he said of John, "among those born of women no one is greater than John: yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."

Coming from Jesus, such praise must be given immense significance. Here is John, who sees his life and work as conveying a message from God for his time, utterly sure of his role, piercing in his assessments of a society and a people. And here is Jesus, who sees everything about him as admirable. We need to know why. We need to know what it is about this particular messenger that commends him so deeply to

our Lord. Then perhaps we can find some criteria by which we can judge others who claim that they possess such messages.

Perhaps the overwhelming single attribute that commends John to us is that his whole being is directed to a focus beyond himself. He has hardly appeared on the public scene when he insists that this is not about him but about preparation for another who has not yet come into public consciousness.

At a time when response to his ministry seems to have peaked, John shows nothing less than nobility of spirit when he points two of his remaining disciples toward the approaching Jesus. Nothing could be more generous and unselfish than John's statement referring to Jesus: "He must increase but I must decrease." If we had heard nothing else from John's lips, those seven words would assure us that he was no demagogue trumpeting an agenda of the self. Here is a sure way to assess the claims of anyone professing to have a message for us from God.

We hear not a word of resentment from John when public acclaim shifts away from him. The evidence points to his ministry continuing in other ways. He shows extraordinary courage in his readiness to criticize the lifestyle of Herod himself. John's reputation was such that even Herod—whom we can assume was in today's terms a petty dictator—hesitated to attack John directly.

Nothing shows the faithfulness of John more than his last moments. At some stage in a ghastly imprisonment in Herod's dungeon, beset by all the agonizing questions and doubts that come in solitary confinement, wrestling with a faith that has undergirded and energized his life for most of his adult years, John manages to smuggle out a message to Jesus that comes from the depths of his being. "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" What is beautiful and moving in this question is the unquenchable longing to be faithful to another, to someone he deems greater than himself.

The irony of John's life is that while he is passionately proclaiming his message of judgment on his own society, we come to realize what a magnificent human being he is. It may be that he remains significant for us because he is the preparer—as he called himself—for Jesus' appearance on the scene. But John is far from being—to use a phrase from pop culture—the band that warms up the audience for the main act. He brings the music of his great humanity, his courage, his generosity of spirit, his unaffected humility, his faithfulness in the face of suffering and even of death

itself. No wonder Jesus thought the world of him.

One can't but wonder if anyone ever told John what his father— even then, as Luke gently puts it, “getting on in years”—sang at the birth of his baby son. “You [my son] will go before the Lord to prepare his ways.” One wonders if Zechariah knew the quality of the man his child would become, a person who would not merely point to the coming of one greater than himself, but would live so magnificently as to prepare us for him who would live perfectly.