

St. John The Baptist

The Man the Saviour Praised.

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Australian Catholic Truth Society No.0991 (1945)

When I was a very small youngster, John the Baptist was merely one of the more difficult hurdles in the path of the Confiteor: “I confess to Almighty God, to Blessed Mary ever Virgin, to Blessed Michael the Archangel, to Blessed John the Baptist...”

As I grew into a college student, I found him recurring in the magnificent art of the Renaissance. The painters of those glowing days liked to present him chiefly as one of the group made up of Mary and her little Son and Elizabeth and her strong young man son. Even then he was clad in rough garments, a prophetic symbolism, but a fact which Elizabeth, a devoted old mother, would hardly have tolerated.

She was not likely to clothe her little boy in rough camel’s hair. Anyhow I soon found out that there was no basis for the pictures and the lovely groupings. John probably never saw his divine cousin until, a grown man, he welcomed Him on the banks of the Jordan.

As a Catholic I discovered that John plays an enormous part in the liturgy. The Church is constantly referring to him, writing him into the Mass — though St. Joseph was never granted a place there [not until Pope John XXIII added his name to the Eucharistic Canon]. And I learned that whole nations, France notably, regarded him as precisely a patron needed for a race that loved the Saviour.

I Meet a Saint.

But my real introduction to St. John the Baptist came at the hands of a man to whom I owe much besides. Father Claude J. Pernin, who as a young Jesuit teacher had guided my way into the Society of Jesus, remained a friend through the years. Chiefly he was the spark which (or should we say who?) constantly enkindled in me new interests and new enthusiasms. To drop into his room at Loyola University in Chicago was to expose oneself to some electrical contact that invariably resulted in an intellectual or a mental explosion. He had no need for the famous log which is supposed to be the third ingredient — together with professor — and pupil — needed to make a university. All he required was a willing listener, or a university class and a kind of small, personalised retreat was in progress.

I remember knocking on his door on this historic day, wondering, as I did, what the enthusiasm of the moment might be: a new author he had discovered, a great classic from which he had recently blown the dust, a radio programme that had sharp significance, a new scientific invention that he felt would revolutionise the world, a new friend whom he found inspiring? What?

New Enthusiasm.

He turned his head as I entered, and I saw that he was deep in a stack of manuscript paper. He waved one of his currently important mechanical pencils in my direction. And as I sank into his chair, he began to speak in a low murmur that soon rose to eloquent peroration.

“I’m working on a new conference for a retreat. It’s going to be about John the Baptist.” For a second I sensed an intuitive connection between his own French ancestry and the enthusiasm the French have for their beloved Jean Baptiste.

“What a man! What a man!” he continued. (That phrase was still complimentary and not stereotyped slang.) “I never heard a retreat conference on St. John the Baptist. Have you?”

He did not pause for an answer. “A really modern man... and how badly needed in our times! Courage... the courage to tell the truth to the powerful, no matter what it cost him personally. A rugged, fiery crusader who beat men and women with the whip of his words, and that loved him for it... or hated him enough to slice off his head.... What tremendous devotion to Christ! And yet Christ neglected him as He neglected no one else in His life. Or was it neglect? Was it tribute to a man who didn’t need to be babied along....who, no broken reed, could stand alone... yes; and then stand aside for the man he knew to be greater than himself? What a death! What a magnificently dramatic death!”

He whirled on me, shaking the sheets of scribbled paper in my direction. “What do you know about John the Baptist?”

What Came of It?

With a mixed sense of abashed ignorance and suddenly enkindled interest I confessed that I knew almost nothing about him.

He smiled in that inimitably friendly fashion and waved the sheets in my direction: “If you ever make a retreat with me from this point on, my boy, you will. From this day onward no retreat without a talk on exactly the type of man we moderns need. No retreat without John the Baptist to teach us how to act when Christ is around.”

Whether he ever wrote the conference and delivered it, I’m not absolutely sure. Even if he did, it lingers on only in the memories of those fortunate few who listened to his undoubted eloquence. The notes he left after his premature death would be of little help. His jottings were cryptic, a succession of lead words that meant everything to him and nothing to anyone else; and often they were not words at all but scrawled shorthand characters in the system of shorthand invented by his father and taught these days almost in no place in the world.

Discoveries.

But when I left his room, I was fired with a desire to meet and know the Precursor of the Lord. I found shortly afterward that “The Lion of St. Mark” throughout the early chapters of the second Gospel was no lion at all, but the voice of John the Baptist roaring in the desert. I came to realise with amazement that the man we think of as having been old, mature, grey-haired, and lined of face was, when he was murdered, only a few months older than the Saviour — a youngster by the standards of years, perhaps not more than thirty-three years old, or less.

Each new picture that I saw of him I came to analyse carefully in the light of my growing knowledge of him: the strong man in whom were blended the elements of a hermit and of a violent crusader; a fierce orator who could tear the silken garments off a Pharisee’s back and leave his

naked, wizened soul trembling in the wind, yet a man who could turn to the poor on the riverbank and give them a most consoling, simple, reassuring code of conduct; the prophet who kindled the fires in the light of which the world's Saviour could walk upon the stage; a self-effacing man who, once his speech of introduction was made, would quietly disappear from the scene; a man who cried aloud for penance that would wash away the world's foul, defiling sins, yet who found for Christ the sweetest and gentlest of metaphors: "Behold the Lamb of God."

A Man Indeed.

John the Baptist would have made, I often thought, with all respect, one of the greatest of radio orators. How he could flay the guilty — naming names and calling people by their characteristic sins! No wonder that he captured the fancy of an Oscar Wilde, and has been used as the central figure of a modern opera, "Salome." But I feel sorry for Wilde and Strauss if they met the great saint in eternity. He probably flung at them the taunts he heaped upon the sinful Herod and the rotten Herodias, who lived with Herod in incest. I cannot fancy the Baptist's bearing with patience the writers who thrust him into the centre of a lustful story whose heroine is the vicious Salome of the seven veils.

Because he was a man among men and a prophet surprisingly with honour among his own people, I thought he might bear reintroduction to men and women of the present age. He despised hypocrites. He had frank and savage names for those who sinned in the flesh. His reaction to the slovenly, quasi-concubinage of much of modern marriage would, were he living today, make him socially as unpopular as he was in the court of Herod; he would not bear our lax customs with patience or in silence. His crusading spirit would gather men and women for high adventure. Certainly today he would be sending his own followers, and all who would willingly listen to hear and accept and follow the Saviour of the world.

John the Baptist was, perhaps strangely enough, beloved by the Jews. Josephus, the great Jewish historian, regarded him as an honour to the one race in the world that produced authentic prophets. The Baptist became a pivot around which the Old Testament swung swiftly into the New. He was the link that connected the Old Law of Moses with the New Law of Christ. He was the last of the divinely-chosen Jewish leaders. He was the first of the authentic Christians.

Curtain Rises.

The life of John the Baptist begins in high drama. The setting is the world's holiest. Before the curtains of the holy of holies, the most sacred spot on earth, stands the white-clad figure of the sacrificing priest. We see him check on the incense in his thurible, and then, as if seeking strength, look back through court falling away from court to the people who wait breathlessly while he, their priest, carries their prayers symbolically into the presence of God.

At that exalted moment the priest, Zachary, of the line of Aaron and married to a woman from the same holy line, forgets the great trial of his life: that he and Elizabeth are childless.

For at that moment all the people of Israel are his children, and he carries their joys and their woes, their gratitude and their gripping needs into the audience chamber of the Almighty.

Precisely that audience chamber is the spot that God selects for the lifting of the old priest's trial and the first announcement that the redemption of mankind is at hand. We can see the old man bending over the incense altar and then drawing back, his eyes slightly clouded by the heavy smoke that rolls up and that in vivid metaphor expresses the people's prayers that rise in sweet odour

before the throne of God. We can see through the smoke the slowly forming outlines of the Angel Gabriel. History was to know him as the Angel of the Incarnation. At that second he was only a glorious being whose presence there threw the old priest into a tremble.

The Angel.

The news of the Incarnation, the long-delayed arrival of the Messiah, for whom Israel has been waiting almost to the point of despair, is announced indirectly. Before there is mention of Jesus, there is mention of John.

“Fear not, Zachary, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you shall have joy and gladness, and many shall rejoice in his nativity. For he shall be great before the Lord and shall drink no wine nor strong drink. And he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother’s womb.

“And he shall convert many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God.”

High Destiny.

Thus far it was John, and only John. But now the true greatness of this promised son leads directly to the Saviour.

“And he shall go before Him in the spirit and power of Elias [Elijah]; that he may turn the hearts of the fathers unto the children, and the incredulous to the wisdom of the just, to prepare unto the Lord a perfect people.”

The saints have loved to dwell on the momentary incredulity of this old man stunned by the greatness, of the prospect opening before him, yet realistic about his advanced age and the age of his wife.

“And Zachary said to the angel: Whereby shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.”

Then the angel lifted his voice in power and prophecy: “I am Gabriel, who stand before God, and am sent to speak to you and to bring you these good tidings. And behold, you shall be dumb and shall not be able to speak until the day wherein these things shall come to pass, because, you have not believed my words, which shall be fulfilled in their time.”

Vision.

Outside the people stirred in restlessness and worry. Their priest was delaying too long. What was happening within the secrecy of the holy of holies? Then when Zachary reappeared, one look at his face, and they saw a vision reflected there. He opened his mouth to explain the wonder as best he could; but no words came. His voice was gone. He passed through their murmuring midst and stumbled home, frightened, chastened, but in his heart expectant and filled with a great hope.

“And after those days, Elizabeth his wife conceived and hid herself five months, saying: Thus has the Lord dealt with me in the days wherein He has had regard to take away my reproach among men.”

After Six Months.

Six months after Zachary’s vision in the Temple the Angel Gabriel, messenger of the Messiah, again sped to earth, bowed before a Virgin, saluted her as full of grace, and announced the greatest tidings

ever spoken to a mortal. Then he turned from the Saviour — soon to rest in Mary's heart — to the Saviour's ambassador, already lying under the heart of Elizabeth, Mary's cousin.

"Behold your cousin Elizabeth, she also has conceived a son in her old age; and this is the sixth month with her that is called barren; because no word shall be impossible with God."

Mary knew then that God's plans were complete; to announce her Son-to-be-born, a forerunner had already been conceived. She lowered her head in acceptance of divine maternity, knelt to the God within her, and then sped down the roads and into the hill country where Elizabeth dwelt in happy expectancy.

Miracle Visit.

Mary entered her cousin's house, pulled back the heavy curtain of Elizabeth's room, and spoke her greeting. Instantly Elizabeth was on her feet, and, in that Visitation, which artists have so loved, caught her younger cousin by the hands. The child within Elizabeth's body leaped with joy; for the Holy Spirit filled her and washed away any stain of original sin that might have weighed down the spirit or hampered the ambassadorial feet of John the Precursor.

"Blessed art thou among women," cried the joyous Elizabeth, "and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold as soon as the voice of your salutation sounded in my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy."

And then Mary's lovely young voice rang out for the first time in one of literature's greatest poems. "Magnificat!" she intoned, for the sole audience of Elizabeth and the unborn baby who was to walk ahead of her advancing Son as He moved toward world conquest. "It Magnifies the Lord, my soul does!"

Entrance.

Events flow swiftly. John is born, with Mary to serve him as nurse. The neighbours and relatives rush in to shower the aged mother with their congratulations. Then the question of a name comes up. "He shall be called John," says Elizabeth. And the relatives — with an eye to family tradition, a possible rich uncle to be pleased, and a customary name to continue — cry out in sharp protest: "There is none of your kindred that is called by this name." Zachary, still dumb, reaches for a tablet and writes emphatically, "John is his name." And immediately his tongue moves and he speaks another of our great poems: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; because He has visited and wrought the redemption of His people."

Then, taking his little son in his arms, he turns prophet: "And you, child, shall be called the prophet of the Highest. For you shall go before the face of the Lord to prepare His ways; to give knowledge of salvation to His people unto the remission of their sins... to enlighten them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death; to direct our feet, into the way of peace."

Never on the head of so small a babe had been laid so heavy a responsibility and so high a trust. Never was another mortal man to fulfill so high an office with finer zeal and more unselfish devotion.

No Further Contact.

Mary hurries back to her own home, to her affianced bridegroom, and to the swift-moving events of the Nativity. Thereupon John simply disappears from the pages of the story. Not once during all the

intervening years between his birth and Christ's baptism in the Jordan does he and the man whose cause he is to trumpet come into even passing contact. The cruel plot of the first Herod hurries the Infant away into Egypt. Early in his young manhood John goes out into the desert to take up that hermit life which is his preparation for his divinely-appointed office. When Jesus returns to Nazareth, it is to settle down to the quiet, uneventful years in a carpenter's house and shop. The young John is already beating his soul into the steel weapon he was to lay about him, earning through penance and prayer the right to be the first to speak to mankind of the God Who had come to save them.

Hidden.

So the lovely Renaissance paintings that depict the Holy Family together, the little Jesus and the little John playing in youthful companionship, are delightful poetry and very bad history. John was later to confess that he would not have known Jesus when he first saw Him on the banks of the Jordan if God had not sent a vision to point out that this was the Man for Whom he was waiting.

The hidden life of Jesus in Egypt and in Nazareth is paralleled by the hidden life of John in the desert. We know nothing about him — until suddenly he comes striding out of the wilderness, a grown man with a sense of his divine commission and a message that rings out to the delighted ears of the expectant people.

Return.

The man himself must have captured at once the imaginations of the people. He comes wearing a camel's-hair cloak, with rough leather girded about his loins. Not only has he fulfilled the angel's prophecy that he would not drink wine, but he has eaten no meat and has depended for his food upon the wild honey and edible locusts of the desert.

Instantly the people think of the prophecy of Isaiah. "Behold," he had foretold, centuries before, "I send my angel before your face, who shall prepare the way before you. A voice of one crying in the desert: Prepare you the way of the Lord; make straight His paths."

A voice! Exactly that did John the Baptist think himself. He was the trumpet blasting reveille over the heads of a drowsy people. He was the man whose very garb showed his contempt for the soft living and easy customs that had sunk the people of Israel into moral stupor and apathetic content with the partial religion that was theirs. He was a shock to their nerve with his strident voice and imperative mood.

Prologue.

"Do penance" he cried, and his voice rocked the countryside. "For the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Christ later on was to characterise him as "a burning and a shining light." And so he was. But John thought of himself only as the actor presented with the role of prologue. He gave an introductory speech, nothing more. He laboured that the stage might be ready for the entrance of the main character. He cried aloud a cue-line which, even as he uttered it, concluded his part in the drama and was signal for the entrance of the star.

The sight of this hermit suddenly walking the banks of the holy Jordan enthralled the people. They hardly paid attention to what he said, so engrossed were they with the majesty and power and radiance and uniqueness of the man himself. We can see them pouring along the roads from

Jerusalem and from the little towns of Judea. The good and holy came and stepped down into the stream to feel over their heads the waters of his symbolic baptism. He was indicating to them the cleanness that should characterise a world fit to welcome the Son of God made man. The evil and merely curious came, and he lashed out savagely at their secret crimes.

For Hypocrites.

Upon the banks of the river a cluster of Pharisees and Sadducees stood looking at him obliquely, holding their robes back from possible contact with the sinful mob that was going down into the water. Prophetically John saw the part they would play in the tragedy of Christ. Now, looking at their contemptuous mouths and cynical eyes, he read their pride, their secret determination not to lose their grip on power and precedence. They had not come to him out of sorrow for their sins. They felt they had no need for cleansing waters. They just wanted to be sure that this new fanatic would not upset their apple-carts and that he taught the mob nothing that would disturb the soft flow of their ordered lives of ease and wealth.

The voice of John is strident as he lashes out at their hypocrisy.

“Ye brood of vipers! Who has showed you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth, therefore, fruit worthy of penance.”

He watched their curled lips. Why, they were saying, as they shifted to avoid the hot breath of this zealot, they were of the chosen people, chosen among the chosen, with the law inscribed on their garments, their hands fresh from many ceremonial washings. Abraham was their father, the law their safeguard.

“Think not to say within yourselves,” cried John, probing with merciless fingers their secret depths: “We have Abraham for our father. For I tell you that God is able of these stones to raise up children to Abraham.”

“Prepare Ye!”

He turned back to the crowd. “For now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree, therefore, that does not yield good fruit shall be cut down and cast into the fire.” He pointed with the power of his ambassadorship to the Messiah they expected: “I indeed baptise you in water unto penance, but He that shall come after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear. He shall baptise you in the Holy Ghost and fire.”

He whirled again on the cynical sceptics. He knew that they dreaded the possibility of the coming of the Messiah. They wanted no disturbing of their power over the people, their control of lush revenues, their influence with Rome. “Whose fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly cleanse His floor and gather His wheat into the barn. But the chaff” — his voice stung them with its flat implications — “He will burn with unquenchable fire.”

For the Poor.

The leaders of the people, who in so short a time were to be leaders only of the landless, turned away in contempt. But the people themselves pressed around the speaker. “What, then, shall we do?” they begged.

Almost in a foretaste of what Christ was later to preach, he answered: "He that has two coats, let him give to him that has none; and he that has meat, let him do in like manner." It was social justice and charity that he enjoined upon them.

On the outskirts of the crowd stood the publicans, poor outcasts, despised by everyone. Strangely enough, John's rough invective did not frighten them. Instead, they walked into the water beside him and asked, hopefully, "Master, what shall we do?" His answer was full of gentle reassurance. "Do nothing more than that which is appointed you," he replied. They sighed with relief. Yes; there was hope for them, despite the contempt showered upon them by the self-righteous.

And Soldiers.

A crowd of soldiers had been standing nearby, wondering whether they, men of blood and death, dared approach the cleansing waters. One of them finally mustered a courage higher than that needed for battle. Inspired by the gentle answer given to the publicans, he approached John and asked, "And what shall we do?" Again the stern man is surprisingly gentle, wonderfully reassuring to the less fortunate: "Do violence to no man; neither calumniate any man; and be content with your pay."

Content with your pay? The soldiers understood that. No more pillage; no more graft wrested from people unable to defend themselves against oppressive garrisons; no more sacking of conquered cities.

Not the Christ.

But his transparent goodness and his strength and courage made them hope for still more from him. Could it be that he was the Messiah? What luck if they were to be led by a man with such power and gentleness, such eloquence and fearless courage!

"Who are you?" It was the messengers of the high priests who put the question. But it was the populace who hung on the answer.

Instantly he killed any false hopes. He did not answer the question they asked; he answered the question they wanted to, ask. "I am not the Christ," he said.

"What then?" they demanded. "Are you Elias [Elijah]?"

They had believed that Elias would return to earth to act as spokesman for the coming Saviour.

"I am not," he answered.

They persisted. "Are you the prophet?"

He shook his head. "No." His humility assumed no such title.

Then they pounced upon him: "Who are you, that we may give an answer to them that sent us? What say you of yourself?"

And again he cried: "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord."

The unbelievers who later on were to deny the Christ Whom John prefaced now turned away without further interest. The populace, who later were to crowd up the Mount from which Jesus would speak, pressed about him, hoping to hear more.

He Comes.

And that more came soon. John looked up from the stream into which flowed the steady cross-current of sinners and saw upon the bank the tall, straight, manly figure of the one for whom he waited. We can see the Precursor look up in surprise. Is this really the man? He had not in all his life, laid eyes upon Him. Yet for Him he had spent thirty years in constant preparation. With the hope of His coming was his whole soul preoccupied. Was this the man?

He watched while the newcomer — His clothes lying on the river bank — walked slowly into the water, His head bowed for baptism.

“I knew Him not,” John later told his disciples. “But He Who sent me to baptise with water said to me: He upon whom you shall see the Spirit descending, and remaining upon Him, He it is that baptises with the Holy Ghost. And I saw, and I gave testimony that this is the Son of God.”

Lamb of God.

The tremendous truth of man’s redemption by the sacrifice of the Son of God, a truth on which he had long meditated in the desert, now floods upon him. In a voice almost too tense for more than exclamation he cries out, “Behold the Lamb of God.”

The Lamb of God, indeed! He, John, was to die for the whim of a sinful girl, the vice of a sinful woman, the weakness of a sinful king. This Lamb was to die the ultimate sacrifice of all sacrifices, for the sins of all the world.

Then with a start John realised what was expected of him. The newcomer, this expected Messiah, for whom he was to act as mere outrider, had bowed His head, expecting baptism, his baptism, a pitifully ineffective symbol of poured water. John drew back in no affectation of humility, but in a real sensing that, for some inexplicable reason, their places had been reversed.

“I ought to be baptised by you,” he cried. “And come you to me?”

Obedience.

Jesus for the first time looked into the eyes of the man who had given Him an entire lifetime of relentless devotion. It was His first words to this ambassador. “Suffer it to be so now. For so it becomes us to fulfill all justice.”

And John, obedient to the first demand of this “mightier than I,” poured the water of symbolic baptism over the head of the Christ of the nations. But only for a moment was this humiliation tolerated. Instantly the heavens opened, and the world received its first full revelation of the Trinity. John stood there in the water, perhaps the only one present who understood what was taking place. From heaven thundered the voice of the Father: “This is My beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased.” And the Holy Spirit descended from heaven in the form of a stainless dove.

So the Father in heaven and the Son upon earth and the Holy Spirit midway between them offered to the delighted eyes of the Baptist the glorious vision of the Trinity, the three Divine Persons in the one God.

His Disciples Leave.

This was the high point in John’s career. Up to this time he had had the centre of the stage. He had gathered disciples around him, training them, not for his work, but in anticipation of the need which

the Messiah might have for trained followers. Now, very quietly and without the slightest resentment, he begins to step aside. He starts with one of the hardest renunciations a man can make. He sends to the newcomer his own best friends, the men he has prepared and bound to himself with affection and gratitude.

It was some time later that Jesus walked again near the river Jordan. John was still baptizing, but again he cried out to his disciples, "Behold the Lamb of God."

Two of his followers heard this. They looked up at the magnificent Man Whom a few days earlier their master had baptised, and they knew that John had given them a signal. They left him standing there in the river and followed Jesus.

Jesus turned and saw the young men. He loosed upon them His compelling smile.

To Find Jesus.

"What seek you?" He asked.

They didn't know what to say. This was clearly the Man about Whom John had been talking. But what was expected of them? They fumbled for a question that would not sound too abrupt, and hit on a rather strained one:

"Master, where dwell You?"

Jesus answered, "Come and see." And they walked along with Him to spend the day in His company.

What were the feelings of John, left alone there in the river? Jesus had not so much as spoken to him. It was not to him, the Precursor, but to his disciples that Christ had issued that gracious invitation. And John knew as clearly as he could know anything that the men would never return to him again. Not after their knowing the companionship of Christ would they be content to spend their days in the company of the man who merely foreshadowed Him.

Was there a certain wistfulness in the eyes of John as he saw them disappear? Or was there rather a sort of holy pride that he had contributed to the Saviour not only the preliminaries of His mission but the men who were to help Him with His work? For of the two men one was Andrew, who later, glowing from the thrill of that day with Jesus, rushed off to find his fisherman brother, a big, rough chap called Simon.

"We have found the Messiah," Andrew cried. And out of curiosity Simon went along with his brother to see this man who outshone even the Baptist. [The other of the original two was John the Beloved disciple.] Then together they rounded up Philip, a fellow townsman. Then, Philip's friend, Nathaniel, known as Bartholomew joined the little group. And when next John again looked up from the river, here was Jesus surrounded by a growing cluster of associates, led by the men whom he first had selected and to whom he had given their initial training and inspiration.

Waning.

But John was not yet through with his swift retreat into oblivion. Christ, he learned, had begun to baptize (though it was actually the disciples who were baptizing). There was no question in John's mind about Christ's right to take the holy Jordan for His locale. Quietly John slipped away, higher upstream, into smaller tributaries, then to tiny creeks further and further away from the Jordan.

Willing as John was to give way before the rising power of Christ, he had friends who lacked his sense of proportion and humility. When they found him baptising in a subsidiary stream, they boiled over with indignation.

“Rabbi,” they cried out, saluting him with all the respect they felt for his undoubted power and holiness, “He that was with you beyond the Jordan, to Whom you gave testimony, behold He baptises, and all men come to Him.”

You can feel the indignation in their report. Possibly they expected to see John flare up in resentment. Why the fellow they are talking about had got His start from John. If John hadn’t borne testimony to Him, would people have paid any attention to Him? Now, with all the consummate nerve He was trespassing in John’s own river, taking over John’s own work of baptising. And, to make things worse, the very crowds that once had flocked to John were now flocking in fickle fashion to the intruder.

The voices of his friends were tense with irritation. They waited for the eloquence of John to blast the Man Who had taken over his friends, his river, his work.

Increase — Decrease.

Instead John answered with sweet reasonableness.

“A man cannot receive anything, unless it be given him from heaven.”

Yes, he implied; He has received my disciples, my river, my work. But heaven gave these things to Him. They are His by right. “You yourselves do bear me witness that I said I am not Christ, but that I am sent before Him.” He turned, then, to a comparison that they could easily understand. “He that has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears Him, rejoices with joy because of the bridegroom’s voice. This, my joy, therefore, is fulfilled.” Christ is the bridegroom; I am the friend. The people are His bride, not mine. I am happy to stand aside and let His joy overflow my soul.

Then he laid down quietly and simply his whole platform, the course which he had set for himself and meant to follow to the end.

“He must increase, but I must decrease.”

Grand, brave, unselfish John! He simply steps aside with a smile, happy that the real Christ has come, that the people now walk with the divine bridegroom. His work is done. He lives contented in the reflection of the joy of his Lord.

The Foe.

But his is not to be a life of quiet retirement. His stepping aside is not to bring him peace and rest. Upon the throne sits the second Herod, Herod Antipas, true kin of the man who had had the babes of Bethlehem butchered, in the hope that, by his killing them all, he would be sure to murder the Infant King. This Herod had taken to wife his own brother’s bride, and she and Salome, her lustful daughter, ruled the palace and set the standard of conduct — conduct that shocked their Jewish subjects. The Romans were used to crime in high places; the gods had set the fashions; the emperors and empresses had been glad enough to translate the vices of pagan divinities into human custom. But this was not the accepted way in Judea. So the John who had not hesitated to slash at the

hypocrites on slightly lower levels did not now hesitate to strike straight at the incestuous King Herod.

“It is not lawful for you to have your brother’s wife,” he thundered.

Herod Listens.

Herod had his moments when conscience awoke from its drunken stupor and spoke compellingly. First he heard that John had denounced him in the public streets. Then, to his amazement, but to his admiration — for Herod was still man enough to revere courage — John dared, camel’s-skin garb and all, to stride into the palace, beat upon the throne-room door, stalk before the king, and without so much as a glance at the women, mother and daughter, who shrank back from his righteous wrath, demand that the king give up the woman to whom he had no right.

Oddly enough, Herod listened. He even seemed to be glad to hear the prophet. Was he himself sick of his sin? Was he tired of the slavery which passion had fastened upon him, and weary of the dictation of this woman, who, through her grip on his body, reached out to grip his kingdom, too? He let John go free. He respected his honesty and admired his fearlessness.

But Herodias...

But a vindictive woman is not to be insulted without payment. Herodias hounded her lover by day and nagged him by night, until at length Herod sent out his soldiers to capture the prophet and throw him into a not too uncomfortable cell. For a bit Herodias was pleased. But then, to her amazement and fury, she found that mere captivity was no way to silence courage and truth. The people gathered outside the bars of John’s cell while he denounced her, the queen, in the very names she most rated and most deeply hated. And, what was worse, Herod, who had a warped, twisted, superstitious interest in religion, had the fellow brought out of his cell at intervals and insisted on listening to him. It was that same queer curiosity which later made him lean forward with acute interest when Jesus was dragged into his court, hoping that the “magician” would do one of the tricks about which the whole town was talking.

It was bad enough for Herodias to hear echoes of what John was saying about her and her conduct. It was intolerable to walk into Herod’s study and find him closeted with the fellow, who, as she entered, stood up, pointed a finger at her, and named her with an unbearable, unendurable name. So Herodias, who knew Herod better than she knew the palm of her hand, laid her plans. John’s tongue wagged too much. She would silence it in the most effective way that a tongue could be silenced.

No Repining.

Meanwhile, John spent his days in prison, and Jesus lifted not a finger to save His ambassador. Did John wonder a little at the silence? He, John, had given Jesus all that he had. Now that he lay in a prison cell, the man who had miracles for every chance stranger, for any tramp that came along, for any beggar who stretched out a trembling hand, sent no angel — as later He was to do for Peter — struck down no guards — as He was to do so easily in Gethsemani.

Many a lesser man would have sat and brooded in resentment. “After all I did for Him, He treats me like this!” Many a man less self-effacing would have used his power with Herod or the strength of his influence with the people to manage his own escape, seeing that his friend took no steps to effect it. Instead, John makes another disinterested gesture. He sends Christ still more of his disciples.

A Last Gift.

Despite the rising sun of Christ's power, a few of John's disciples had continued to follow him. They went with him into the obscurity of the back country. In the easy-going fashion of the day they were permitted to come to him in prison and take care of his physical needs, few though they were. They loved to sit with him while he talked to them, prayed with them, or dreamed his great dreams of what the Messiah would do for Judea. With something like positive distress he noticed that these few clung to him and paid little or no attention to Jesus. He loved them sincerely; indeed, he loved them so much that he was unwilling to see them sacrifice themselves for the lesser leader who was himself.

So one day he determined to throw them into such close association with Jesus that they would realise His claims to the Messiahship and give Him their fullest devotion. He deliberately sent his remaining disciples to the Saviour, Who was walking the roads of the land and working His miracles and teaching His marvellous, compelling truths.

"Just ask Him this," he instructed them:

"Are You He that is to come, or look we for another?"

They went, these last of his disciples, and John saw them go with the deep hope that, once they had felt the magnetic fascination of the Saviour, they would join Him forever and leave His Precursor without disciples.

Jesus Answers.

Jesus' answer was all that John had hoped it would be. First of all, they were confronted with the power of His mission. "In that same hour He cured many of their diseases, and hurts, and evil spirits; and to many that were blind He gave sight."

All this the disciples of John saw with amazement and delight. Sweeping these proofs together into a sentence, He said, "Go and relate to John what you have heard and seen: The blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are made clean, the deaf hear, the dead rise again, to the poor the Gospel is preached."

They ran back with the message. And when John saw their faces, he knew that he had lost still more of his disciples — and he was deeply glad.

No Help.

Yet, in our cheaper way of thinking, isn't it strange that never once did John send disciples to say to Christ, "If miracles are so easy for You, why don't You work one that will deliver me from captivity?" Never once does he suggest, "You were loud in Your praise of those who visit the captive. Couldn't You turn aside for a few minutes to visit me, who spent a lifetime working for You?"

Not John. He knew that the miracles of Christ were never worked for Himself or His friends; they were for the confirmation of His mission and the bulwarks of His truth. When He was concentrating on His Father's business, He had not time to turn aside even to spend a night under His mother's roof. John asked no exception in his case. He had given Christ everything, down to his last disciple. He waited until Christ's own good time for whatever return He cared to make.

The Plot Begins.

But Herodias had finally conceived and developed her plot, and it was a clever one. The dinner that she spread for Herod and his fellow wastrels was heavy with food and deep in wine. They ate until they were soggy; they drank until their minds were reeling. Then Herodias sent out her own daughter to dance for their flaming delight. She danced as only one of those Oriental harlots knew how to dance; and when, at the end, she fell in mock exhaustion before Herod's banquet table, the men were in an uproar of passion.

Herod leaned over and lifted the hot, panting girl.

"Ask anything you want!" he cried. "Yes, anything. On my word as a king, if you ask for half my kingdom, it's yours."

Salome rose to her feet, slipped about her the robe a maid presented, and bowed her head in mock humility and affected gratitude.

"Let me consult," she said, in pursuance of the plot, "my mother, your wife, and the lady you love."

She left the hall to the thunders of the men's applause, while with ribald joke and obscene compliment they flattered the drunken king on his good luck in having such a stepdaughter.

The Plot Succeeds.

Salome returned still breathless, still very shy and diffident.

"Speak, my girl," cried the king, "What ever you and your mother want. Be generous in your request. Ask freely."

The girl lifted her head. Her eyelids were slits; her lips were taut and hard. There was no smile now, no shy timidity.

"Give me," she almost hissed, "the head of John the Baptist on a platter."

As if they had suddenly been doused with cold water, the men sat completely cold sober. They had expected her to ask for jewels, for a span of racing Arabians, for half a dozen slaves, perhaps for a holiday in Rome or in the Alps. She was, asking — for murder.

"What?" demanded Herod, rising sharply as if a blow had slapped him to his feet. "The head of —?"

Granted.

Then one of the nobles, relapsing into uncontrollable drunkenness, snickered. Someone else, perhaps a serving maid who in the kitchen below had had forewarning of the plot, giggled. Then suddenly there rose around the table a roar of laughter. It was a great joke. The girl was smart. They all knew Herodias was brilliant, but that her daughter, a mere dancing girl, should be brilliant, too!

They looked at Herod's face; flushed, worried, distraught. He was cornered, the fox; cornered, and it did them good to see it. As for themselves, they and the other courtiers would be glad enough to be rid of John's solemn preaching, his constant spoilsport attitude, his ringing of the tiresome changes on their vices. It would clear the atmosphere to be rid of the fanatic fool. Bully for the girl! They were all for her.

"But Salome..." began Herod, lapsing into what was almost a stutter.

Her eyes never left his face. A courtier nearby cried out through his hysterical laughter, "But you swore to it, Herod. We heard you."

"That we did," they all echoed.

And Herod could only lift his hand in a signal that summoned the executioner, who always stood, grim warning to even favoured guests, behind his throne.

Martyrdom.

The door of John's cell opened, and a lantern was flashed in his face. He saw the curved sword cradled in the arm of the man who followed the lantern bearer. He rose quietly to meet martyrdom. Did he even then wonder if from a distance the Man Who once cured with a word a centurion's servant who was miles away from Him might work a miracle for him, John? Did he wonder even slightly why he was allowed to die?

Clearly not. If this was part of the divine plan, if the kin of that Herod who had slain the infants close in years to the Infant Saviour now slew the man who was nearest to the grown Saviour, John accepted his destiny gladly.

Without protest or struggle John the Baptist died under the sword of the executioner. And the banqueters applauded when Salome seized the platter, danced with it, twirled before the nauseated Herod, and carried the proof of John's silenced tongue out to the woman whose sins the Precursor had flung into her shameless face.

When Jesus heard the news, His only gesture was to withdraw with His disciples briefly into a desert place... to think gratefully of His friend?... to pray for the soul of one who surely needed no prayers?... to talk with those who had been his friends about the man who had willingly surrendered them to another master?... Who knows?

Highest Praise.

All we know with certainty is that Jesus spoke of John as He never spoke of any other man living or dead. He praised him with an enthusiasm that was unique. He found no blemish in John. He held him up boldly for those around Himself to follow. He gave him to the Church Universal as the great, shining example of heroism and stalwart courage and a life of penance terminated in a death for truth and honour and decency.

Christ paid John the highest compliment; He placed the Precursor beside Himself, exemplifying the two roads of perfection. The critics constantly taunted Christ with the fact that He and His disciples did not fast as John and his disciples had fasted. Finally, Christ replied in this amazing piece of irony:

"Whereunto then shall I liken the men of this generation?... They are like to children sitting in the marketplace, and speaking one to another, and saying: We have piped to you, and you have not danced; we have mourned, and you have not wept."

It is so easy to see that type of petulant children: They have music, and it does not make them happy; they have sympathetic friends, and they refuse to accept the sympathy. They don't want to laugh; they don't want to cry. Nothing pleases them. Of such were Christ's puerile critics.

Then Christ goes on to place the example of John and Himself side by side.

“For John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine; and you say; He has a devil. The Son of man is come eating and drinking; and you say: Behold a man that is a glutton and a drinker of wine, a friend of publicans and sinners.

“And wisdom is justified by all her children.” Both He and John had given them imitable examples; the example of neither was accepted by the people who might have followed either and been saved.

A Witness Galled.

When confronted by the Jews, who accept neither his miracles, His teachings, nor the testimony that He gives of Himself, Christ calls upon the testimony of John. Here was a great man, a good man; and this man had spoken in His favour. Why did they pay no attention to this magnificent leader?

“There is another that bears witness of Me; and I know that the witness which he witnesses of Me is true. You sent to John, and he gave testimony to the truth... He was a burning and a shining light; and you were willing for a time to rejoice in his light.

“But I have a greater testimony than that of John; for the works which the Father has given me to perfect, the works themselves, which I do, give testimony of Me that the Father has sent Me.”

His final appeal is to His own works and to the mission that God, His Father, gave Him to fulfill. But He does not hesitate to call upon John for his testimony, too. It was a high and wonderful honour to be made the one to whom Christ Himself appealed for proof of His Messianic office.

Tribute Supreme.

The ultimate tribute which Jesus paid to John the Baptist is the most glowing of any He ever gave to any man. There is nothing like it in the whole Gospel.

“He began to speak to the multitudes concerning John.

“What went you all out into the desert to see? A reed shaken with the wind?”

Ah, they knew what He meant by that ironic question. The man they had flocked to hear had a strength they had not met again until they met Jesus. John was no broken reed, no willow blown about by the breeze. They had felt the tremendous strength of the man. They had leaned upon him as upon a strong tree that no storm could bend and no blowing wind could ruffle.

“But what went you out to see? A man clothed in soft garments?”

Certainly the implication was clear. As He spoke, the people thought of Herod, who then held John captive. Herod was clothed in soft garments, purple silks, white, dainty linens. The very suggestion that the strong, rugged Baptist might be so clad struck them as ridiculous.

“Behold,” Christ continues, “they that are in costly apparel and live delicately are in the houses of kings.”

Yes, indeed... in the houses of kings. John was in a cell of a king’s palace.

“But what went you to see? A prophet? Yea, I say to you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written: Behold I send my angel before your face, who shall prepare your way before you.

“For I say to you: Amongst those that are born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist.”

Elias Himself.

Far in advance of all the great men of the Jewish people Christ listed His friend and ambassador.

The Pharisees, who searched the Scripture, to find texts with which to trick Him, taunted Him with the charge that He could not be the Messiah, since “Elias, [Elijah] must come first.”

Christ retorted: “Elias indeed shall come and restore all things. But I say to you that Elias is already come, and they knew him not, but have done unto him whatsoever they had a mind.”

“Then the disciples understood that he had spoken to them of John the Baptist.”

The spirit of Elias had descended to Elisha. But that same spirit, Christ claimed, was possessed in fullest measure by the man who had prepared His way and made straight His paths.

“Amongst those that are born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist.” This was simple canonisation by Christ Himself. It was the lifting of a still living man — for when Christ said this, John had not yet been martyred — to a place among the Doctors. The Saviour had laid the seal of His approval on one man beyond all others. History need never doubt the place which John the Baptist held in the esteem of the Saviour.

Puzzle.

Yet again He follows this tremendous compliment with a puzzling sentence: “Yet he that is the lesser in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”

Taken by itself, the text is perplexing. If we remember John as the link that binds the Old Testament with the New Testament, as the man who in his person combines the prophets of the Old Law with the Apostles of the New Law, the statement becomes clearer. He along among all men was the quintessence of the regime and the religion that were passing and the prelude to and Precursor of the regime and the religion that had just begun. In his role in the New Law he was supremely great. The fact that he climaxed the prophets was far less important than the fact that he was prelude to the Messiah and the Kingdom of Christ upon earth.

But whatever the exact meaning of the text, Christ and His Church have taken amazing care of John the Baptist throughout the centuries. He is deep in the heart of the Christian liturgy. Churches throughout the world are raised to his honour and called by his name. For centuries more Christian boys were named for him than for any other saint. His feast occurs, not once, but twice during the course of the liturgical year, a name day and a day that commemorates his martyrdom. He stands historically as the man who raised the Jewish character to its highest purely natural heights. Yet he served to establish a pattern by which Christian heroes have lived and Christian apostles have preached and Christian martyrs have died.

Triumphant Story.

That, briefly, is the story of John the Baptist. It is the story of a man who hated sin and who fought it to death. It is the record of a man who so loved the Saviour that he put all personal considerations in second place to the interests of Christ. It is the account of the generous nobility of a man who asked nothing for himself and gave and gave and gave — only to find at the end apparent failure.

Yet Christ’s praise of him has rung down through the centuries: Men have learned high heroism by simply watching John.

Herod, who slew him, later sat looking at the Saviour of the world; and big eyes, blurred with the lust for a dancing girl and bloodshot with the remembrance of the prophet's decapitated head, failed to recognise the God Who stood before him. John looked up at a stranger upon the riverbank, and with pure eyes saw in Him the Lamb of God. What higher honour could have been John's than to be permitted to step aside and see the world's Saviour move along the paths he had made straight, in the companionship of the disciples he had helped to train, into the glorious kingdom of which he had been the first subject, the thrilling trumpeter, the general who rode at the head of the king's own advance guard?
