

Homily for the 2nd Sunday of Advent, 2015: Year C: Lk 3:1-6

When a story begins with “once upon a time”, we know that a fairy tale is about to unfold. When you read “In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit”, you know that a fantasy saga is about to begin. And when you see the much anticipated words of “A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away”, you realize that the long wait is over, and once again that great space epic will commence to the delight of fans the world over.

What is common in all of these story introductions is that you right away realize you are encountering a world of myth, legend and imagination. These stories are not historical accounts of lived reality and few would presume them to be anything other than examples of brilliant minds producing literary and cinematic masterpieces.

On the other hand, the introduction to the public ministry of St. John the Baptist in the Gospel of St. Luke does not fall into this category of myth, legend or an artistic retelling of pretend events. We are now in the realm of historical fact, of actual lived reality, no mere fairy tale but the moment in history when God choose to summon his prophet to prepare the world for the Gospel of His Only Begotten Son.

St. Luke was very intentional in providing us with necessary historical information to show when God choose to introduce St. John the Baptist to God's People. We learn that his appearance came in the 15th year of the Emperor Tiberius, that is the year 27-28 AD. At this time, Pontius Pilate was the Roman governor of Judea, a man known for his cruelty and mass crucifixions of the enemies of Rome.

Other political figures in the Holy Land were the two sons of Herod the Great (who had attempted to murder Christ after his birth in Bethlehem): Herod Antipas, the puppet king of the Roman empire who ruled the region of Galilee where Christ spend most of his public ministry and who was also responsible for the eventual execution of St. John the Baptist, and his brother Philip, who was another puppet king of the Romans in the regions north of Galilee. Little is known of the tetrarch Lysanias, other than he ruled in the region known as Abilene.

St. Luke also tells us who were the most important priestly figures of the day, the High priest Annas, who served as High Priest of God's people

in the years 6-15 AD and Caiaphas, who served as High Priest from 18-36 AD and was responsible for having condemned Jesus Christ to death.

While these names, dates and positions of power may strike us as insignificant historical details, they in fact reveal that God chose a very specific moment in history to reveal His Son, who up to this point was living a hidden and unknown life in Nazareth, to the world through the prophetic announcements of St. John the Baptist. What we read here concerns a difficult time in human history. The People of God were experiencing great oppression from the Romans and their own priesthood, and so God chose the most unlikely of men to appear in the wilderness to fulfill the prophecies of Isaiah about the arrival of the Messiah.

When St. Luke quotes the writings of the Prophet Isaiah to speak of the mission of St. John the Baptist, he is taking them from a portion of prophecies of Isaiah that is known as “the Book of the Consolation of Israel.” In these prophecies, Isaiah tells the people of his day that they will once again go into exile, which occurred when they were taken as

captives into Babylon, but that someone would arise from among them to lead lead them back to the Promised Land.

He would be no mere human prophet like Moses; for it would be God himself who would bring His People to the Promised Land. Yet what Isaiah spoke of was not mere political liberation or the beginning of a new world order. Rather, he spoke of spiritual liberation from sin and death and entrance into the one true Promised Land, the heavenly kingdom of the God of Israel. What was required first though was for someone to prepare the way for this Messiah to appear, a voice crying out in the wilderness who would lead all flesh to see the salvation of God.

Why did people follow the Baptist? His external appearance was far from inviting and the content of his preaching was extremely challenging: to repent from sin, to reject sin's presence in one's life and to believe that the promised Messiah had come into the world. What made St. John the Baptist so compelling was that he was a man of true integrity.

Here was the son of a former high priest, one who had the blood of the priesthood of Israel in his veins. Yet he never ministered in the temple

because he was called to become the Lord's prophet, and show a commitment to God that was unprecedented in his day.

He was a man of profound humility, who desired to prepare the way for Christ and then fade into the background. He was a man of austerity who cared little for the riches of this world and trusted God would provide for his needs. He was a man of courage, unafraid to admonish kings and those in power to turn away from sin at the cost of his own life. He was a man of prayer who knew that only by God's grace could he be the Lord's prophet. And he was a man of unshakeable fidelity, who did not waver from his mission, and believed that his efforts to prepare for Christ's arrival had not been in vain. He was a man who did all things well and continues to captivate the hearts of all who long for salvation.

The season of Advent avails us with the opportunity to imitate the life and virtues of St. John the Baptist. We too are called to be men and women of integrity, courage, humility, austerity and prayer, always striving to prepare the way for others to know Christ through our prayers, words and actions. May St. John the Baptist intercede for us.