

Show and Tell

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, dear friends: When it comes to legal evidence, nothing establishes a fact quite so well as eyewitness testimony. You can have tons of circumstantial evidence in a case, like the suspect's fingerprints on the murder weapon, the victim's blood found in the trunk of the suspect's car, the body of the victim found buried in the suspect's back yard. All of this evidence, which seems quite incriminating, could have other very reasonable explanations. For instance, the whole thing might be a setup – the real killer manufacturing and planting false evidence to make your man appear guilty in order to deflect suspicion away from himself. So you can't be sure. But you *can* be sure if there's someone who was there and who saw the crime committed who can point his finger at the suspect and say under oath and with firm conviction, "*I saw him do it.*" Nothing is stronger or more certain to establish the truth than eyewitness testimony.

And that's why St. John the Baptizer stands in a unique place among the Old Testament prophets of God. All the others before him testified about the Lord's Chosen One *to come*. They prophesied about his lineage, his place of birth, and all things that he would do when he came – like Isaiah does in today's reading, in which, speaking through the mouth of the prophet, the Lord says to his Messiah, "I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." All the prophets spoke the truth about Jesus. Their testimony is 100 percent accurate. But only John the Baptizer got to extend his index finger and say, "There he is. That's the guy. Look: the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." The other prophets *foresaw* the ministry and mission of Jesus; and they longed to see the fulfillment of the things they said about him. They could *tell* about Jesus; but they could not *show* him. John not only foresaw and spoke about what the Christ would do when he appeared; he was the one the Lord chose to be the eyewitness. He got to see Jesus with his own two eyes and had the privilege of pointing him out to God's people. He could both *show* and tell.

This is why when John speaks about Jesus, we ought to sit up and take notice. In human terms, anyway, his testimony carries the most weight. With this in mind then, let's listen to what John has to say.

First he says, "Behold!" or "Look!" When he sees Jesus coming toward him, he addresses those who are standing around, and says, "Look at that man". It's not enough that John sees him; he wants others to see him too. This is what an eyewitness is supposed to do: he's supposed to share his unique knowledge. He supposed to inform others about what he has seen so they will see it too. But let's ask, what would the people to whom John was speaking see when they turned and looked at Jesus? You know, in religious art or in motion pictures about the ministry of our Lord, it's never hard to pick out which of the painted images or actors represents Jesus. He stands out. There's no mistaking him. And since these are the images we have in our minds, it's easy for us to get the false impression that it was the same for the people who were actually there. It wasn't. Jesus had no special look about him. In fact, the prophets tell us that there was nothing about him that would draw your attention. He wasn't taller or more handsome. His hair wasn't any different (it would have been cut quite short, by the way). His clothes weren't cleaner or fancier. Nor did he have a rich radio voice that made you want to listen to him when he spoke. He looked and sounded just like any other Jewish guy.

And for that reason I can't help but think that the people to whom John spoke were a little disappointed. Here John has been talking about the coming of the Lord since his ministry began, and more recently John's been saying he'll be revealed any day now. So there's a sense of excitement among his hearers; at long last they are going to see *the Christ*. And when the eagerly anticipated moment arrives, everyone turns to look expecting to see someone very impressive. And here comes Jesus strolling along looking very plain and ordinary. Most of the folks must have thought, "What, *him?* *That* guy? You've got to be kidding! He looks so *common*. I was hoping for more." All the more reason that the Lord gave us an eyewitness. An eyewitness is able to reveal truths that no one else can know or come to on their own. He has seen what others haven't – and won't know unless they are told.

But let's return to John's testimony. Having directed his hearers to look at Jesus, he goes on to explain what they're looking at: the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. This too is a shock. These people who were longing for the Christ to be revealed are expecting something different. In the Christ they hope to see a king, a conquering hero, a forceful leader who is the Lion of Judah and the rightful heir to the throne of David. They expect someone who can restore the glory of Israel. But instead of a mighty, fearsome lion, John describes Jesus as a lamb – a creature that's docile and weak. And c'mon: who wants to be led by a lamb? And to what kind of victory could a lamb possibly lead us? The people who heard John must have been baffled by what he said. "John, are you sure you're saying it right?"

I wonder if even John fully understood the words that came out of his mouth, for we know that they were not entirely his own. They were given to him by the Holy Spirit. On account of it, we know they were true whether he completely understood them or not. Either way, his prophetic words pack a lot of meaning because he not only describes Jesus as a lamb, but specifically as the Lamb of God who takes away sin. This is a reference to the Old Testament worship system, which all of John's hearers would have been very familiar with. They understood that they brought lambs to the Lord's Temple for sacrifice. The lambs took away sin by dying in the place of the people who brought them – their guilt being transferred to the lambs, and the lambs paying the debt of sin by their deaths. Now John says that Jesus is the Lamb provided by God to pay the debt of sin of the whole world. So what he's saying is that this man he's pointing to is going to die – die as God's sacrifice for our sins.

This is an entirely different way of seeing and understanding the Lord's Christ than John's hearers used to. For them it's a new revelation. But this, John says, was the whole purpose of his ministry. "This is why I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel." John admits that previously even he didn't know Jesus in this sense. Oh, he knew Jesus, they were in fact related; and he knew that Jesus was the Christ – we heard last week how he tried to prevent Jesus from being baptized because Baptism is for sinners and he knew that Jesus wasn't a sinner. But prior to that Baptism, John himself had many of the same false messianic expectations of the Lord's Christ that were widely held in his day. And for that reason he wanted to put Jesus up on a pedestal, above everyone else. He wanted to honor and extol him. But Jesus didn't come to be honored; he came to be humiliated. He came to serve mankind's deepest needs. That's why he got down into the Jordan to be baptized by John. We talked about this last week: how through Baptism John was washing the people's sins into the river and polluting it, and how Jesus who was completely righteous defiled himself by going into the sin-filled water. It was Jesus taking all those sins upon himself – sucking them up like a sponge. But this was one of those light bulb moments for John. "Now I get it, Jesus. I hadn't seen you that way before; but now I understand who and what you are: the Lamb of God who takes away our sins."

And John's eyewitness testimony continues: "I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him." This too was another revelation to John, for he had been told by the Lord that the man upon whom he saw the Spirit descend and remain would be the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit. Again, it makes me wonder what John expected to see. How would the Holy Spirit descend? What would that look like? Would the Spirit come down like a blazing fire displaying God's fearsome judgment and fury against sin? Like a thick cloud stressing the hiddenness and mystery of the Lord? Or would it be something else even more frightful and menacing? John must have wondered what he'd see.

In the end it turned out to be as a dove: a gentle bird that throughout human history has always represented peace. And I'll bet that was a surprise – at first anyway. But upon thinking about it, John would have understood the message. It's this: Jesus, by taking upon himself our sin and being the Lamb of sacrifice, changes the attitude of God toward sinful man from anger and judgment to peace and reconciliation. Through Jesus, God is at peace with the world. And too, through Jesus and the atonement he made, the Spirit would go forth. That is, because Jesus has the Spirit resting upon him, he is able to give the Spirit of God to others.

This, we know, John himself did not live to see. It wasn't until after the Lord's death and resurrection that he gave the Holy Spirit to others; first to his disciples on the eve of Easter, and to his whole church beginning at Pentecost. The point is that it wasn't until the atonement for sin was complete through Jesus' sacrificial death that people – specifically believers in Jesus – became vessels cleansed and prepared to receive the Spirit of God. So John didn't see Jesus actually baptize others in the Holy Spirit; but he bore eyewitness testimony that Jesus was the one who would do it because he had seen the Spirit descend and remain on Jesus.

The final statement of John's eyewitness testimony is the most emphatic: "I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God." How did John witness this? No doubt he heard from his parents the wonderful story of Jesus' miraculous birth. Remember Mary and John's mother Elizabeth were close kin. So John grew up knowing that Jesus had no human father. But that would be second-hand testimony. John says that *he* himself has seen that Jesus is the Son of God. This he observed at Jesus' Baptism. When Jesus was coming up out of the water the heavens were opened, and John heard the thundering voice of God the Father say, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." If there were any lingering doubts in John's mind, that completely eliminated them. So God both showed and told John the truth about Jesus. He received God's testimony. And as an eyewitness to the truth, John too began to show and tell others what he knew about Jesus.

That's what we see in the rest of this morning's Gospel reading. The next morning when Jesus comes by again, John tells two of his disciples who are with him, "Look, the Lamb of God!" These two take the hint. They begin to follow Jesus. And by staying with Jesus, they become eyewitnesses. And they in turn begin to let others know. We hear how Andrew begins by bringing his brother, Peter, to Jesus. Before long, Peter is testifying to the same truth; that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.

There are two quick things I want to point out here. First, that it's always other people who are witnesses to Jesus and the divine truths about him. It's never Jesus himself. Jesus never walks up to someone and says, "Hey, you! Look at me! I am God's Son and the Savior of the world." It never happens. Jesus does not bear witness about himself. He always relies on the eyewitness testimony of others to spread the word about him. And in this sense, he stands apart from all the other false christs that have come and gone. They invariably promote themselves and make grand claims. They say they're somebody important. Jesus takes the

opposite approach. He makes no claims about himself. He just does things. He speaks. He teaches. He performs miracles. And he allows others to come to the proper conclusions by witnessing themselves who and what he is.

The second thing to point out is that this is how the church of Christ grows: when people who have seen and heard Jesus testify to others about what they have seen and heard. That's how you became a disciple of Jesus: by hearing from others who told you about Jesus and who testified about what they have seen. And then you yourself heard Jesus speaking in the sacred Scriptures. You felt him touch you in holy Baptism, in which he gave you his Holy Spirit. And now in the Lord's Supper you see, touch, taste, and smell Jesus as he comes to you in his body and blood bearing witness of the death he suffered to save you. In these ways you have become an eyewitness of the life and ministry of Jesus – an eyewitness given the joyful task of sharing what you have seen and heard: that Jesus, true God begotten of his Father in eternity and true man born of the Virgin Mary, is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, and who even today baptizes his followers with the Holy Spirit to equip them to bear witness to the truth in what they think, say, and do.

Dear friends: like John the Baptizer, you have been made an eyewitness of Jesus and the truths concerning him. There is no better evidence than that which you can provide. Therefore let us all, by God's grace and the power of his Spirit who rests upon us, gladly, willingly, and enthusiastically show and tell others our testimony that they too may be brought to Jesus and made eyewitnesses of his truth. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!