

The word authority includes the word author, meaning “leader, master”. On this third Sunday of Advent, the gospel focuses on the question of authority. It begins by looking at another side of John the Baptist. Gone is the wild man with the strange diet and wardrobe. This is John the witness pointing to Christ. It begins with a “fact finding mission” sent from Jerusalem all the way to Bethany beyond the Jordan; in other words outside of the “Promised Land”. They have heard about John’s baptizing and preaching so come to see for themselves.

These authorities then question John’s actions. “Who are you or who do you think you are? Are you the Messiah, Elijah, the prophet?” John’s response is to confess that he is none of the above, pointing to one who is greater than he is; “One among you whom you do not know.” In the wood altarpiece of a church in Isenheim, Germany, the finger of John pointing to Christ was carved deliberately larger than proportion. In real life, John saw himself only as a witness to Christ.

One of the earliest inventions of man still used today is the magnifying glass. Used in a microscope, camera lens, or eyeglasses, you look through it at something else and whatever it is you are looking at becomes clearer and larger than before. John knew who he was and who he wasn’t, and he realized that his whole life was to be like a magnifying glass through which people could see Christ. So too the Christian life is meant to be lived as John did, our words and actions serving as a magnifying lens through which people sense God’s love.

Scott Skelly was one of our dads running (literally) alongside of the LCOS float in the Rehoboth Christmas parade, handing out the Christmas coloring books we had put together for children. He said later that he heard many people talking on the sidewalk about what an active church LCOS is and how much we do for people beyond our doors. This is a good thing to be recognized for, but hopefully people see not only what ministries we have but the motivation for our doing it. Like John, our actions point to the love first given to us in Jesus Christ.

How about your own life? How do you think people think of you? Do they see you as a nice person, generous spirit, honest and kind? Hopefully on most days, that is an accurate assessment! What will they say at your funeral? Will they list your life achievements, read your bank statement in the eulogy? Or will they pay more attention to what you did for other people? If that is the focus, will they know why you did those things, that it was the gospel that motivated you? How different that kind of assessment is than the usual measure of the world.

We live in a world where people who claw their way to the top in any field are honored, and not doing so is seen as a sign of weakness, where salaries and promotions are based on your latest statistics. If you follow football, you may have heard of Tim Tebow, the current quarterback for the Denver Broncos. He is by all accounts a skilled player, but he is also unabashedly Christian. He doesn't try to convert anyone but it is clear that Christ is his Lord. Experts don't know what to do with him because his success is statistically improbable. He lives his life like John the Baptist, letting people see through him to the love of Christ in his heart.

It takes work to live like that because the small voice inside of us keeps asking if we are getting all that we deserve or need in the world. There is a selfish side to our inner nature that keeps listing success by what we get as a measure of supposed happiness. The truth, however, is that our own heart is more satisfied in giving than receiving, letting go instead of holding on. Joy comes to the heart of a servant before it comes to the mind of a master.

It is the Christ mass celebrating the scandal of God's incarnation that gives us the courage to be a magnifying glass for Christ in the world. We worship a God who allowed us to see through majesty and glory to love and mercy. We worship a God who put aside everything divine to join us in our humble journey of being human. We worship a God who is the ultimate authority but became instead a servant so that we might know, believe, and follow.

The theme song to the TV show "CSI" includes the lyrics of an old rock song; "Who are you? Who? Who? Who are you?" That could be the theme lyric of our gospel text as well. The answer from John was, "look through me to the Christ who is among you." May that be our answer as well, now and always.

+ Deo Gracia +