

Commentary on the Gospel for Mon, Jun 24th 2024

The Mouth and the Finger

In the 4th century, the veneration of John the Baptist became so widespread all over the world. An extraordinary veneration was developed in honour of him. In the artwork of all ages, the Baptist and his life was a favoured theme for renowned artists. He is portrayed with the characteristic camel's skin clothing, the belt around his waist and holding a stick that ends in the shape of a cross.

He is the patron of countless dioceses; shrines and churches are dedicated to him, beginning with the "mother of all" churches, St. John Lateran, founded by Constantine. The name John is perhaps the most common name in the world. Many cities and countries were named after him.

But, St. John the Baptist is not a saint who is often approached for a miracle or for intercession. For a special grace, a blessing, a favour we seek the intercession of other saints but not the Baptist! Yet, he is so popular and how do we explain this?

Perhaps one of the reasons is certainly Jesus' praise of the Baptist: "What did you go out to the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? Then what did you go out to see? Someone dressed in fine clothing? Those who wear fine clothing are in royal palaces. Then why did you go out? To see a prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. Amen, I say to you, among those born of women there has been none greater than John the Baptist (Mt 11:7-11).

Since the beginning of the fourth century, the monks of the early Church – the desert fathers populated the Judean desert where the Baptist had spent his life. They considered him one of them, a model of ascetic life and they spread the special devotion to the Baptist.

As artists have pictured John the Baptist, there are two symbols that typify him very much. One is a mouth that shouts. It is the voice crying in the wilderness, calling people to conversion. It is a voice that could not be silenced, scolding the religious leaders and those who have turned away from God, and urging people to change their ways. Without fear he challenged the King of his adulterous relationship. He paid for it dearly, and cost him his head. The second image is that, the Baptist is the finger pointing to the coming Messiah, and here too he paid dearly, for his own disciples deserted him to follow Jesus. Still he went ahead: the one whom he announced must become greater. The solemnity invites us to be courageous in proclaiming the Gospel and constantly pointing to Jesus. We are not the centre of the Mission, but it is Christ himself.

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