

A Christmas card I received this week shows a little boy sitting on Santa's lap. Santa asks, "Have you been good?" The kid has a deer-in-the-headlights look on his face as he says, "Define good." Some people don't give a straight answer to a question. Sometimes they ask another question, or they give a long answer that sounds knowledgeable, but doesn't really respond to the question at hand. It's a bit annoying. John the Baptist hears two questions in today's gospel, and he doesn't deal with either of them directly.

The first question comes from the priests and the Levites. It's simple enough: "Who are you?" But John answers, "I am not the Christ." Then it's like they're playing 20 questions with him. "OK. Are you Elijah?" No, he says, guess again. "The Prophet?" No, not him either. They say, "Answer the question, would you," so he says, "I am the voice of one crying out in the desert." He never says, "My name is John."

When the Pharisees ask the second question, "Why do you baptize?" you expect John to answer "for the forgiveness of sins," or "for a change of heart," but he doesn't. Instead, he says, "I baptize with water." He doesn't say why he baptizes, he says how he baptizes, and that should be obvious. I mean, "with water" is how anyone baptizes. It's a little like saying, "I use heat when I cook." It doesn't tell you anything.

John ends the conversation with these mysterious words: "There is one among you whom you do not recognize." To John, the problem is not with his answers, the problem is with their questions. These people don't even know what they're looking for. He steers them toward the answers to deeper questions they should be asking.

Advent plays this role for us. We are engaged in a very busy season of the year, but Advent keeps wanting us to slow down and remember what we should be asking. Who is this Jesus whose coming we await? What does he have to offer me? If he is coming as a savior, what inside me needs to be saved? If my life is not completely centered on Christ, where has it gone off course? Which things, which relationships, which activities pull me away from Christ? Am I avoiding Christ by asking pointless questions to the wrong people? If I'm not getting a straight answer to my questions, is it because of me, because I'm asking the wrong questions?

John says, "There is one among you whom you do not recognize." It is still true. We do not always recognize Christ in the bothersome neighbor or the rude driver. We do not recognize him in people with bad loans, lost jobs, or fumbled footballs. We also do not know what illness might be hidden inside us, or what accident is waiting to happen. We do not recognize how close Christ is, that he is among us, even now.

As Christmas draws near, Advent has us ask who is Christ for me? What will his coming mean? Now is the season to spend extra time in prayer to enter the mysterious presence of the one with all the answers, if we would only ask the right questions.