

3rd Sunday of Advent

A Christmas card I received shows a little boy visiting Santa. 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 can be annoying. John the Baptist hears two questions in today’s gospel, and he doesn’t answer either of them directly.

The first question comes from the priests and the Levites sent by Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. 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’re like, “Answer the question, would you?” so he says, “I am the voice of one crying out in the desert.” He never tells them, “My name is John.”

When the Pharisees ask the second question, “Why do you baptize?” you expect John to say “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, which should be obvious. “With water” is how anyone baptizes. It’s a little like saying, “I cook with heat.” It tells you nothing.

John ends the conversation with these mysterious words: “There is one among you whom you do not recognize”—one who will baptize in other ways. To John, the problem is not with his answers, but with their questions. These people don’t even know what they’re looking for. They want explanations, but John gives testimony. Pope St. Paul VI said people listen more willingly to witnesses than to teachers; if they listen to teachers, it’s because the teachers are witnesses.

People asked John, “Who are you?” but John couldn’t define himself without defining Christ. The visitors checked out who they thought John was, but they ignored the one among them whom they were actually seeking. “Who are you?” is a question that drives John’s Gospel. It is implied every time Jesus declares “I am”—the bread of life, the good shepherd, the light of the world—using the name of God revealed at the burning bush. The priests and Levites had the right question, but they were asking the wrong guy.

Advent slows us down to figure out what we should be asking and to whom. Who is Jesus whose coming we await? What does he offer me? If he is a savior, what inside me needs to be saved? If I am not a witness to Christ, where have I gone off course? Which things, which activities, which relationships pull me away from him? Am I missing Christ by asking questions of the wrong people? If I’m not getting a straight answer to my questions, is it because of me?

John says, “There is one among you whom you do not recognize.” It is still true. We do not 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 may 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. We have questions. Now is the season to spend time in the mysterious presence of the right one with the answers, if we would only ask and listen.