

John sets example of humility

Hoopla over a new Church year frequently spotlights the one Gospel it features. When we began Advent this year we rightly expected Mark's Gospel to guide us through the season. Surprise! Today we hear from John. (And next week it'll be Luke.)

What's going on? Mark, remember, is the shortest Gospel. It doesn't have all the stories we want to hear at a time of year like this. So we fill in the blanks with a few other passages and hope no one notices. (We're not the only ones who do this. Remember the musical "Godspell," a retelling of Matthew's Gospel? It borrowed several scenes from Luke.)

The reason we turn to John this week is to hear another story about John the Baptist. Advent follows the same pattern every year – the first Sunday talks about the end of the world, the second and third tell about John the Baptist, and the fourth Sunday starts the Bethlehem Christmas story. Since Mark's introduction of the Baptist comes in week two, and since the other references to John accompany stories of Jesus' public ministry, we turn to the fourth Gospel for another account of John's preaching before Jesus comes on the scene.

As a bonus we get to hear all four perspectives on John the Baptist during the three-year cycle of Advent readings.

Truth be told, the first chapter of John's Gospel is one of the hardest to understand in the whole Bible. But it's also one of the most important. Mercifully, today's passage skips over the tough stuff. (You may hear it on Christmas if you go to Mass during the day.) And what we hear is just the easier-to-understand part about John.

John tells us who he's not, and thus discloses who Jesus is.

John states first that he is not the Messiah, but this long-awaited figure has already come. The term "Messiah" means anointed. It first appears in the Bible fairly late, in Daniel 9:25. Daniel was written just a few generations before Jesus, perhaps about the time his grandparents were born. There we hear a prediction that the restoration of Jerusalem will come at a time of an anointed prince. John cools off the crowd by disclaiming to be the Messiah, but stirs up the excitement by announcing that the Messiah is near.

John also denies that he is Elijah. This is confusing, especially since Jesus infers several places that John is Elijah (Mark 9:13; Matthew 17:13; and Luke 7:27). And last week we heard Mark describing John dressed up in Elijah's clothes. What's Elijah doing here?

Thanks to a prophecy in the book of Malachi (3:1 and 23 which is 4:5 in some translations), people believed that God would send a messenger to proclaim the day of the Lord. That messenger would be Elijah returning to earth. We last heard from Elijah in 2 Kings 2:11, where he ascended into heaven on a fiery chariot. Since there's no record of Elijah actually dying, speculation arose that

he would return on that fiery chariot to announce the day of the Lord. However we resolve the discrepancy between Jesus and John on this point, it's clear that Christians saw in John the embodiment of Elijah's spirit, and the one who would announce that the Lord is at hand.

Finally, John says he's not "the prophet." Who's that? "The prophet" is a character whose coming was foretold in Deuteronomy 18:18. Moses had been such a heroic figure for the chosen people, that they could only bear his departure with the promise that another prophecy (like Moses) would one day come.

Israel never forgot these prophecies. John must have so arrested people's attention that they wondered aloud if he was the one foretold. No. John is the setting for the jewel, as advent is the setting for Christmas.

As you've noticed, many other Scripture passages lie behind the one we hear today. The early Christians knew their Bible so well that the questions posed to John needed no commentary.

What can be done to improve our knowledge of the Bible?

John sets a real example of humility. He could have taken all the attention, but he kept pointing people toward Jesus. We have many public figures in the limelight – in sports, politics, popular music, television, and film. Toward what values do they direct people?

Our Church sometimes receives praise and blame we may not deserve. We notice it in our teachings as well as in our leaders. This year, how is your parish helping people direct their attention away from itself and toward Christ? How could your community better help others prepare for Christmas?

This article first appeared in *The Catholic Key*, December 5, 1993, p. 15.