

2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Let me reread the opening words of today's gospel and then ask you a question: "John the Baptist saw Jesus coming toward him and said." Now, put your name in place of John's: "I saw Jesus coming toward me, and I said." How would you finish that sentence?

Last week we heard Matthew's account of the Baptism of the Lord. This week we hear John's account of the same event. If you've ever wondered, "Why did Jesus have to be baptized? Did someone make a mistake?" you're not alone. Mark and Luke also reported the baptism, and last week's second reading from Acts of the Apostles related how Peter told a new group of converts that Jesus had been baptized. All four gospels and Acts—five different New Testament books tell of the baptism of Jesus, providing strong historical evidence that the writers knew people who found it incongruous, but it wasn't a mistake. It did take place. Why? The simplest answer is the one John gives: It proclaimed a central tenet of our faith: The Holy Spirit like a dove and the voice of the Father revealed who Jesus is: the Son of God.

So, going back to the opening words of this passage, if it were you, what would you say? You're going about your daily duties. You look up and you see something truly amazing: Jesus coming toward you. So you say—what? I'd fumble over my words, with something like, "It's you! Don't come toward me; let me follow you." Or, "Grant me wisdom. Heal my affliction. Give me hope." I'd become a garden hose spraying the waters of my intentions onto the sacred tree of the Son of God.

But John the Baptist did not do that. As Jesus came toward him, he said something, but not to Jesus. He spoke aloud about Jesus. John said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." He said Jesus ranked ahead of him and existed before him. Jesus was unknown and John came to make him known. When he saw Jesus coming, John did not speak to Jesus; he spoke to the people about Jesus.

We can bear witness to Christ every day in the simplest of ways. Whenever we offer forgiveness, we act like the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world; or whenever we acknowledge our lowliness, we testify that Jesus is the Messiah—not ourselves. We bear witness comfortably in church, reciting the creed, surrounded by other believers, but many Catholics find it harder to speak about Jesus on the streets. They don't want to force their belief on others. Bearing witness doesn't have to mean being intrusive. It can mean stating confidently when appropriate, "I'm a Christian." "I go to church." "I try to live according to the gospel." Sometimes we cover up our faith—even lying about going to church so people don't think we're weird.

But we could learn from John the Baptist: In the very moment when he saw Jesus coming toward him, he bore witness to what he saw. He said words we could repeat after we've encountered Christ in our prayer, in the people we serve, or in holy communion. We can say, "Now I have seen and testified that he is the Son of God."