

PRECONCEPTIONS VS REALITY

Among the abilities of humans is the tendency to foresee in the mind just how some future events will happen. Often these preconceptions become the foreseeable reality and are fully expected to happen exactly as one has imagined. But then it becomes reality, and it seldom matches perfectly the preconception resulting in disappointment and sometimes in simple disbelief. Just what went wrong? This wasn't supposed to happen! In some ways this might be the explanation of what is happening in the Gospel for this Sunday. John the Baptist has been preaching for some time about the coming of the Messiah. His message is definite and strong, and almost shouted from the mountain tops. John was a most unusual person, coming out of the desert looking very much like a wild man, yet proclaiming the time is here! The age fore-told by the prophets is imminent. Prepare yourselves! Admit you sins! Change your way of life! And as a symbol that you are sincere in your determination, come, be baptized in the waters of the Jordan, washing away the old self, cleaning up for the new person. And hundreds, even thousands of the Jewish people flocked to hear John talk. Even some Roman Soldiers were there and they too fell under his spell.

John proclaimed loud and clear that he was not the Messiah, but that there was one coming after him, mightier than him, whose sandal straps he was unworthy to tie. He, John, was only a voice crying in the desert: "Make way for the Lord!" as was prophesied by Isaiah so long ago. And then one day as John was baptizing in the River Jordan, there stood before him with bowed head, Jesus himself. John immediately recognized that he was the one promised and immediately knew he was unworthy to baptize the savior of Israel. But Jesus very simply said, "Do it anyway. Later you will understand." And then as John baptized Jesus, there was a voice from on high, "This is my beloved son; listen to him." And along with the voice John, looking up, saw a dove hovering over the head of Jesus. It was a theophany, a living symbol of God as a true trinity.

From that point on, John began to send people to listen to Jesus rather than stay with him. "He must increase! I must decrease" he told his followers. And it was soon after that King Herod had John arrested because he publicly reproached Herod for his incestuous marriage. And then soon after that, Herod had him executed to please his wrongful wife. But ever since baptizing Christ, John began to hear of the way Jesus was preaching and teaching the people a completely new way of living. Some of John's followers began to wonder if Jesus really was the true Messiah. So John had them go to Jesus and ask him about his credentials. Jesus told them to report to John that the deaf now hear, the blind now see, those sick are cured, some have been raised from the dead. When John heard the report he immediately recognized just how Jesus was doing exactly what the Prophet Isaiah had fore-told, that indeed Jesus was the Messiah.

John now knew his calling was finished and he now faced death, but he also knew that the way Jesus was preaching, teaching and showing the people the way to live that he was indeed the true messiah. John also realized that his way of preaching was not the only way the word of the Lord was to be proclaimed. It was the only way he knew and perhaps he felt it was the only way to get through to the people, But now he knew that his preconception was not quite correct, that there are many ways to spread the Good News!

In today's American culture, the spirit of Christmas has become more and more if not totally in many a person's mind, that true happiness and love can only be shown by going all out and buy as much as possible. In the true spirit of materialism, only things can bring true happiness and show true love. This by its very nature seems to be so wonderful and human yet in reality borders on being a total lie. It is not the gift that shows true love and care but the true spirit behind it that must come through. Given the state of the economy today, most people cannot afford expensive gifts, and even more have a hard time affording even a very modest priced gift. And there will be many a family who will grow closer to each other by sharing in the little they have and together realizing that the most important thing they do have is each other.

Add to all this the true meaning of Christmas as it unfolds during this season of Advent. Coming to Mass every Sunday during Advent is not just an obligation; it is much, much more. It is supposed to be a time for each of us to get back in touch with our faith and its reality that should and must be present in our daily lives. If there are children involved, it is so much easier to tell and retell the whole story of Christmas, especially when the older children tell it to their younger brothers and sisters. Not only does this spread the faith in a family, but it welds all involved more closely together in their shared faith. When a family as a family in the sanctity of their home openly talks about and tries to live their faith, something so really easy to do during the Christmas season, then that faith takes deep roots in everyone's heart and will be with each all their lives.

Just about everyone has some opinion of what faith should be like in their lives, and how they should live it. For all too many, this seldom comes to the fore and is rarely if ever even referred to even obliquely. What this comes down to is the fact that too many have preconceived perceptions of what it means to be a believer as well as what it means to be a Catholic. And it is probably absolutely true and valid that not one single perception has even a modicum of reality attached. How does one explain this? Perhaps the roots of an explanation lie in the fact that although today so many young attend religious education programs, and so many of these programs are really top of the line and absolutely first class, nevertheless the one thing that is most difficult to teach in these programs, let alone live it, is the true Catholic Culture. And in a nutshell Catholic culture as every culture is not taught; it is learned by living it. And that is where the family comes into it. A simple grace before meals, a night prayer with a child, going to Mass together as a family, praying together as a family, parents and children together no matter what age that God will help one or another during as difficult time - looking for a job, passing an exam, winning a game, etc, etc, etc. Then the faith comes alive in a family and love becomes a wonderful true experience, and God is real.

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