

## What are the Qualities We Need?

December 10, 2006

Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr

In these weeks before Christmas one of the leading figures in Scripture is John the Baptist. We'll hear of him again next week, and as we begin the Epiphany season, we can read of his baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan.

In the Collect for today we prayed for grace to heed the call of the Prophets and greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ. John the Baptist was convincing to the people of his day, and maybe, in knowing him, there are suggestions of the kind of life it is which can transfuse the love of God into the lives of others. Perhaps we can find in John the Baptist some of the qualities we need and the Church needs to carry out the task which, our Lord has given to us. The story of John suggests at least four such qualities.

John was first of all, a man of conviction as to what he was and the responsibility he bore. He was a messenger and a voice crying in the wilderness.

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Perhaps our greatest trouble is that we do not have his conviction. We may believe that there is a message from God to his children, but we do not suppose that we are to speak it. We lay out a choice of attitudes or actions for people to make, but behind our words sometimes there are qualifiers. We seem to be saying, *but it's up to you*, or, *you do what you want*, or, *take it or leave it*. We speak out as if we are talking about a matter of life and death, but with indifference, uncertainty and unconcern. If we are concerned at all, it is with the Church in its own life instead of with the Church out there in the world. But, if we are agents of God, we must not only be *convinced* that this is what we are, but also to constantly reinforce that conviction so that people may *see* and *feel* it in us and be moved by what they see and feel.

**Secondly**, John possessed a means of ministry in his practice of baptizing those who responded to his preaching. He knew what to do next and he did it. We

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have means of ministry, lots of them. We have Church buildings in which we worship and teach, to which we invite strangers to share with us. We have the Book of Common Prayer. We have sacraments....Baptism, the Holy Eucharist, Confirmation and others which we use to convey specific kinds of grace. We have a trained and qualified ministry to guide us in work and worship. Each of us has our own talents and abilities. These are our tools and, like all tools, they can become dull and loose their edge. We need to express our message to those who need to hear it in fresh terms, sharper and with a new edge.

The **third** quality we see in John is his elemental simplicity of life. His clothes were animal skins; his food, locusts and wild honey, cost nothing to gather and prepare. Contrast this to the life style of evil, opulence and intrigue of those who murdered him. However John did it, such simplicity is hard for the rest of us to accept, let alone achieve, in a time when

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luxuries and indulgences so rapidly turn into necessities. Over the whole span of Church history, it wasn't too long ago that no one thought it was necessary to have heat in churches, but if we didn't have it today, with the weather we've had, this place would be empty. Many of us grew up without air conditioning. No one thought it was necessary for homes or offices or cars or churches. Now many feel they cannot exist without it, no matter what it costs. When Jesus told his new disciples to leave all if they would follow him, he was speaking of a deep human need. If life moves us in the direction of increasing complexity, Christianity, our faith, moves us in the direction of renewed simplicity, that we may be free to live and speak and act for God. Our own demands must be disciplined so that we may have time and money and attention to give, and give with a cheerful spirit.

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Finally, John was a humble man who could say, *After me comes he who is mightier than I, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.* Few of us know much about humility like that. Often the message we send comes through with notes of pride, possibly self-importance, and those who hear are likely to read it as *why don't you become like us?* This is a tough problem. We ought to be proud to serve so great a Lord. Our churches ought to be magnificent and our worship structured, dignified and beautiful, if they are to show his beauty and magnificence and supreme worth. But all of this is so easily misunderstood by ourselves as well as others. The glory belongs to him, not us. We are only servants and messengers, entrusted with enormous responsibilities for just a little while. As John said, *he must increase, I must decrease.* When people can perceive quite clearly that all of us *preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus, our Lord,* then they will forget about the messenger and will pay attention to the message.

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This then, was John the Baptist and some of the qualities that made him the man he was. These are qualities that we need and that we must give to the Church we serve. God help us, that through what we are and what we do, there may be for some people, somewhere, a hearing of the voice and a new beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

**AMEN.**