

PERSONALITIES OF THE NEW TESTAMENT  
"John The Baptist"

INTRODUCTION

The Bible is an album that contains portraits of all kinds of men and women. There are times when we are tempted to regard the Bible as an antique, filled with old-fashioned pictures of old world people. But again it dawns upon us that the people of the Bible are the people of every age - that they live and move on the streets of New York just as surely as they moved on the streets of Jerusalem - that basically their temptations and their temperaments, their troubles and their triumphs are ours as well.

Still and all, the Bible has not persisted as a book of power simply because it is a fascinating collection of profiles of men and women. The Bible has persisted because it is the Word of God and at its center is "The Word made flesh, and dwelling among us"....even Jesus Christ. All of the lives of those in the New Testament are related to that life which is the Light of the World.

JOHN THE BAPTIST

Unique in his relation to that light is the life of John the Baptist. Luke's Gospel tells us that from the beginning Jesus and John found their lives intertwined. Their mothers were related and the boys in age in only months apart. If thus they were cousins, it is interesting to conjecture how it might have been when they met together as boys. We cannot know, of course, except that from the portraits which we have of each as an adult it is not too difficult to picture some of these same traits developing in childhood. So we can imagine that as they walked the streets together John would be remote and reserved - while Jesus would be making friends; or John would curl up for a day with the scrolls of the Law and the prophets - while Jesus, though no scorner of learning, would put the scrolls aside after a time to tramp the hills and fields; or John would be a perfectionist, impatient with any delay or detour - while Jesus would share the same ideals, but he would be ever so much more understanding of the people and problems who seemed to stand in the way of progress.

And so one pictures the two boys growing up and, as so often happens in families, seeing less and less of each other as the years brought increasing responsibilities. Very early in his youth, John must have decided on some form of religious vocation. His particular hero seems to have been the prophet Elijah, and he set himself the goal of becoming in his day what the prophet Elijah had been eight centuries before. Luke sums up in a single sentence a period that must have covered years in John's life: "And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his manifestation to Israel". The sentence speaks of tremendous resolution and discipline. With all the dedication of an athlete determined to become a great athlete - with all the single-mindedness of a musician resolved to become a great artist - so John the Baptist was in training to become a great prophet of Israel.

The day came when he understood that his preparation was finished, and he emerged to speak to people with a clear, "Thus says the Lord". He always must have looked as though he belonged to the wilderness, the original version of "The tang of elementary things" of which Carl Sandburg wrote in describing Lincoln. So Matthew's Gospel says, "John wore a garment of camel's hair, and a leather girdle around his waist, and his food was locusts and honey". I suppose

we would have called him a beatnik or judged him to be strange and eccentric. May he wasn't the type of person you would invite home for Sunday dinner, but mind you there was something about that man that made people stop and listen, and having heard, go back again for more. The record puts it this way - "Then went out to him Jerusalem and all Judae and all the region about the Jordan". The appeal of this man evidently stemmed from the strength of his convictions, the clarity of his call, the depth of his courage. In a day when many people did not quite know what they did think, or if they did, dared not to speak - here was the refreshing spectacle of a man of God who knew precisely what he thought and who dared to say it in scorn of the consequences. And for a time, at least, great multitudes of people respected him and responded to him.

At the height of John's popularity, Jesus came from the carpenter's shop in Nazareth to listen. When the sermon was over and John asked for people to come forward to be baptized, Jesus was among them. Jesus was baptized by John and this marked the beginning of Our Lord's ministry. It's interesting to note that the stage was set for what might have been a time of intense competition and conflict between two great leaders. It was not long before the crowds began to shift from John to Jesus, and the followers of John reacted in very human fashion.....criticizing and complaining. But John revealed his full stature when he quieted them and told them, "He must increase but I must decrease" Jesus was the Savior. John the Baptist was the "pavior" - the one who paved the way for the One who was greater.

The last chapter in the life of John was not a pleasant one. He had been imprisoned, as prophets frequently were and are when their conscience and their courage make them unpopular. Arrested by Herod, John languished in prison, and there he might have stayed indefinitely had it not been for an incident at a palace party that reveals the depths to which human nature can sink. It was Herod's wife, of all people, who hated John for his judgments on her loose and immoral character. With her daughter, Salome, she waited for her moment of revenge. The opportunity came in the midst of a birthday party that Herod was giving at the palace. It was quite a party, from all reports, and no expense was spared on the drinks and the entertainment. And when everyone was well befuddled and bewitched, Salome volunteered to do a dance as her contribution to the festivities. Herod was so enthralled by it that, in his mood of intoxicated expansion, he offered her the world and all as her reward. In effect he said, "Name it and you can have it". Her mother was sober enough to take him at his word and she answered in behalf of her daughter - "The head of John the Baptist". The request was enough to shock Herod into a sobriety. And the picture that the Gospels give of him at this point is that of a weak, little man, who knew well enough what was right and longed to do it. "And the king was exceedingly sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests who were present he did not want to break his word to her". And so a righteous man was killed because of a wicked woman's whim and because a man who had been given the power to rule a people could not rule himself.

John was little more than 30 years of age when he died - yet he takes his place right at the head of the line of prophets who preceded Jesus. In the eyes of the Master, there was none greater. Our Lord termed him "more than a prophet" and went on to say, "There has risen no one greater than John the Baptist."

## HIS FEARLESSNESS

Suppose we consider now in some detail two qualities of this man, John that are the measure of real greatness in his day and our day, too. The first is his fearlessness - a genuine courage to speak and declare the truth as God gives us that truth. John the Baptist had it - in abundance. He pronounced God's judgment upon his people and upon his times. He told the Pharisees that they were a "generation of vipers". He told the tax collectors that they were robbing the people. He told the soldiers that they were misusing their power. He told Herod that he had transgressed the moral law with his convenient bartering of wives. He had a clear sense of right and wrong. He saw sin for what it was and cried out against it - even though it meant, as it ultimately did, his life.

This kind of courage is a rare commodity. It was a fearlessness of spirit that comes from a sure walk with God - from the conviction that God and one man with moral courage make a majority. It is a quality that is too often lacking in our modern lives of conformity and compromise - even in the pulpits of our land. There's a story about a young divinity student who above all things desired to be guarded in his public utterances. One Sunday morning he said to his people:

"My beloved hearers, if I may call you so, you are under some measure of moral obligation to repent, so to speak; and in case you do not, I would venture to suggest that there is a remote possibility that you may be damned, as it were to a certain extent"

You stack that up against John's clear and cutting words to his congregation: "Bear fruit that befits repentance. Every Tree therefore that does not bear fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire".

And no less in everyday life is real Christian courage too rarely in evidence. How easily do people go along with the crowd in actions and attitudes that seem cheap and shabby in the light of the life of Jesus. How easily do people rationalize shortcuts and compromises in their business and professional and social lives on the grounds that "everybody else is doing it....why shouldn't I". How easily does a family join in a neighborhood movement to exclude a family of another race or nationality, not because they have anything against the family personally, but because they were afraid of what may happen to them financially and socially if they take their Christian teachings and convictions too seriously.

Is there any one of us who does not sometimes see himself mirrored in that tragic description of the weakness of Herod: "The king was exceedingly sorry but...." There is, just as Lowell said, "the moment to decide, in the strife of truth with falsehood, for the good or evil side. Then it is the brave man chooses while the crowd stands aside". Christian friends - if your discipleship and mine goes very deep, it should quietly prepare and strengthen us for our moments of decision!

## SELFLESSNESS

The second quality that stands out in John's personality is his selflessness - his gracious acceptance of a lesser role in the pageant of Palestine which God was directing. Surely

John knew the temptation to nurse his hurts and pamper his pride when he saw the multitudes leaving him and going to Jesus, but he revealed the bigness of his soul when he said of the Master, "He must increase, but I must decrease".

To lose oneself in devotion to Christ and his causes, until it isn't so important what happens to one's pride and prestige - this is the mark of a true man of God. This, too, is a quality that many present day Christians need to develop. Selflessness.

We live in a society where much stress is placed upon what the world calls "success". You must get good marks. You must get in a prestige school. You must find a job with a future, and push you way to the top. You must be on the winning team. There is much to be said about encouraging a person to realize his potential and for the discipline and perseverance that are required in the journey. But a person is ill-equipped to face life if his only training is for success. For life is not all success, and no person, however brilliant and competent, will go on forever being "first". How much woe there is in the world on the part of people who bitterly resent the greater success or popularity of another person. But occasionally we come along side a person who is content to do his best in some second or third place and reveals no resentment when another passes him by on the way to first place.

Roland Bainton is one of the great teachers of this country. His father before him was a preacher, and this is what the famous son writes about his little known father; "

"His congregations never numbered more than 200. He was an inconspicuous minister, yet he was a contented minister. He was not cankered by jealousy, tormented by ambition or racked by frustration. Within the framework of frailty, he aimed at excellence, reminding himself that 'the wayside pool reflects the fleeting clouds as exactly as does the mighty ocean'".

To be sure, it is a great and gracious person who can say and mean, "He must increase, but I must decrease". John could say it. Can you. A young person may be able to say it out of devotion to his team or school or church or even the future of his land, when someone else walks off with the honors. A person may be able to say it in love and loyalty for the work he does and the causes the work represents, when someone else achieves advancement and acclaim that were never his. Parents may be able to say it in devotion to their mature children, when their children move out to live their own lives and are no longer dependent upon their guidance.

And this was not only a part of John's greatness, but it was also part of the greatness of Jesus himself. Paul put it this way:

"Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God... emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even the death on a cross."

Fearlessness and selflessness. We remember John the Baptist because of them. Two qualities that were part of his greatness - two qualities we would do well to cultivate in our lives - for they are the measure of greatness of men even today.

PRAYER      And now O God may that spirit ~~was~~ that was in thy servant John be also in us that we ~~too~~ may serve our age with courage and humility in the spirit of Jesus Christ in whose name we pray. Amen