

Second Sunday of Advent, C – December 9, 2018 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 900 words

On this second Sunday of Advent, John the Baptist comes on the scene and begins the hard work of preparing the way for the Lord Jesus. And St. Luke, in his gospel, provides a curious list of names to contextualize John’s mission historically: among them are Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate, Herod the Tetrarch, and the high priests, Annas and Caiaphas. These are men who are living and active as God’s word comes to John and impels him into his ministry to prepare for Christ’s first coming. They are also men who will be connected in some way with our Lord’s passion and death. Let us take a closer look at them.

Tiberius Caesar was Emperor of the Roman empire from 14 to 37 A.D. The famous Roman historian, Pliny the Elder, called him the “gloomiest of men”;¹ another historian said that Tiberius was “a suspicious, disillusioned misanthrope”.² He was known for being spiteful, and his poor governance paved the way for an even worse successor, the infamous sociopath, Caligula. It was under Tiberius that Jesus was tried and sentenced to death. “Pontius Pilate preferred to deliver an innocent Victim to death rather than risk denunciation to such a master”.³ How important it is that those entrusted with power should rule firmly, rightly, and justly!

While Tiberius may have been a dark and malicious ruler, Pontius Pilate, governor of Judea, had good intentions, even if he also lacked competence.⁴ Indeed, as we read through the Passion narratives we see that Pilate was an unsure type – wanting to do the right thing, but also fearful of political fallout.⁵ He was not, therefore, a “bad actor” as such, but his “lack of backbone” would have serious consequences. Alas, history shows that weak and waffling rulers often do a great deal of damage: harm is not only caused by malice. Even if Pilate tried to wash his hands of Christ’s sentence, yet it had been in his power to stop it.⁶

Then there is Herod the Tetrarch, also known as Herod Antipas. He was ruler in Galilee, the neighboring district to Pilate’s. Pontius Pilate would eventually hand Jesus over to Herod for judgment, but Herod would immediately send him back.⁷ But before that, the Tetrarch would put John the Baptist to death. Herod was a total moral disgrace, living in an incestuous marriage, which the Baptist forcefully condemned. However, the gospels tell us that he also enjoyed listening to John.⁸ He was obviously a deeply conflicted man. And it was his own stepdaughter, Salome, who prevailed upon him to present her with St. John the Baptist’s head on a platter.⁹

Finally, there are the high priests, Annas and Caiaphas; they would not have as much to do with John as they would with our Lord. When Jesus was arrested he was first brought to the home of Annas,¹⁰ who questioned him about his teaching; Jesus answered – then one of the soldiers struck him. They then took him to Caiaphas,¹¹ who had convened the Sanhedrin, which handed him over to Pontius Pilate. Caiaphas had said that it was “expedient that one man should

¹ Pliny the Elder, *Natural Histories*, XXVIII.5.23. “Tristissimum...hominum”. Cited in the Wikipedia article for Tiberius Caesar.

² Newman C. Eberhardt, C.M., *A Summary of Catholic History*, vol. 1 (1961: Binghamton, NY; B. Herder Book Co.), p. 30.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 36.

⁵ Cf., e.g., John 18:38-19:9.

⁶ Cf. Matthew 27:24.

⁷ Cf. *Ibid.*

⁸ Cf. Mark 6:20.

⁹ Cf. Matthew 14:8-11.

¹⁰ Cf. John 18:13.

¹¹ Cf. John 18:24.

die for the people”,¹² thereby foretelling our Lord’s death. In Annas and Caiaphas we see religious service that lost sight of its purpose, degraded into cynicism and political calculation.

When Christ and his cousin, John the Baptist, were born, the whole world was at peace. Now, as John begins his ministry, the whole known world is under a dark cloud, with corruption or weakness at almost every level. Yet it was in the midst of that mess that the word of God came to John to launch him onto his mission to welcome Christ. In other words, even as seemingly everything was resolutely headed down the path of decadence and destruction, God was already at work to bring about the solution. I wonder how many were looking trustingly to the Lord at that time – or were, rather, wringing their hands over impending doom?

What about in our time? There is no shortage of political corruption at all levels; and in the Church, there are scandals and deep divisions. We can so easily get bogged down by focusing on these negative things, even convincing ourselves that the end must really be nigh; indeed, that perhaps God has abandoned us to our own devices. The history of salvation as narrated in the Bible – and specifically, today, in the mission of St. John the Baptist – suggests to us otherwise. Our sovereign Lord is already at work to effect a change, a solution, true renewal; and it falls to us to look for that – to look for the light – rather than to focus on the darkness.

The solution that the word of God is preparing in our world – then as now – is ultimately Christ’s coming in glory, when he will be shown as Lord and ruler of all. We must heed John the Baptist’s words daily – “Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths” – if we will be among those who “see the salvation of God” when Jesus comes. How are you “preparing the way” this Advent? What specific things are you doing? Are you especially trying to focus on the good, the true, and the beautiful – on the things of God? Or are you weighed down by the darkness? Let us look together to the Christ whom John announces – who is our hope!

¹² John 11:49.