

[Readings: Isaiah 49:3, 5-6; Psalm 40; 1 Corinthians 1:1-3; John 1:29-34]

First impressions can be deceiving. Think of the people who are in your life today and compare your original perception of them with what you know now. Sometimes our initial “take” on someone is off by a little, and sometimes by a lot. A few of my closest friends began as adversaries. They admit they didn’t care much for me either at first meeting. If you can even imagine that! Not liking ME?

John the Baptist was on a learning curve about Jesus the same as the rest of us. We think of John as having the home-court advantage because he was the prophet connecting the Old and New Testament to announce “the One who is to come.” Since he was the one “preparing the way,” surely he knew all about Who and what was coming! But John was not a comic book hero endowed with superpowers. He was a faithful servant of God straining to hear the Word being spoken in his times. As we strain in our times. He KNEW Jesus, but he did not UNDERSTAND Him and His true mission.

By all accounts, John did have an innate instinct about the presence of the holy. Didn’t he jump in his mother’s womb when Mary of Nazareth, large with child herself, came into view? That sense of the sacred would serve him well. But it was not infallible or immune to human factors like ignorance or doubt.

John makes the admission in today’s Gospel that, although it was his chosen profession to be the forerunner of the Coming One, “I did not know him.” He says these words twice, so that we have no confusion about his meaning. John had no cosmic pipeline making him a mere trader of inside information. Even up to his last days on this earth, in prison, John sends his disciples to Jesus to ask, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we look for another?”

Do WE ask that same question once in a while? Where are you, Lord?

So, we see that John hesitates both when Jesus presents Himself for Baptism and again later on while he is under arrest and beginning to wonder if Jesus is the right Messiah.

Some scripture scholars theorize that when Jesus was in the desert for forty days, that John and some of John’s followers joined them.

That way, and during the three years of the public ministry of Jesus, John's faith grew from the time he surrendered further to the divine agenda in baptizing Jesus to the day he was prepared to truly understand Him as the Paschal Lamb, the Lamb of God.

Jesus is "the light to the nations." The Gospel is quick to distinguish the true light from the lamp bearer. John's eagerness to raise the visibility of this light by his own ministry and testimony qualifies him to be a "glorious" servant of God. You and I are called to be light-bearers to the Light of the World.

If Isaiah's prophecy is a PREQUEL to John and Jesus, then Paul's ministry is the SEQUEL -- let's call it Light to the Nations II. Because it's not the end of the story but only the second episode in what seeks to become a continuing novel. Paul asserts to the folks at Corinth that he serves at the will of God, no less. Like the Baptist, Paul is an ordinary man "called" to do an extraordinary thing. And he gives his full attention to the task. Paul's learning curve was unusually steep, and he raised the light of Christ high enough for the Gentile world to see it. You and I are called and chosen to be Light to the Nations, III.

Isaiah says the servant people of God will become a "light to the nations." In what ways do I help others to be sources of goodness and light to the community?

Saint Paul writes that those who belong to the Church are "called to be holy." What do I understand holiness to mean? What are the practical steps one takes toward holiness? How do I encourage holiness in myself and others?

John the Baptist call Jesus the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." How can I promote a greater spirit of self-sacrifice in myself and those with whom I am in contact?

At Mass each week we quote Saint John the Baptist, who said, "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." Because the Gospels were spoken for decades before they were written down, it's likely that Christians have been repeating these words for more than 2,000 years. He looked at Jesus

and saw someone who'd had a radical and deep experience of the Spirit and invited everyone to "Behold!" All these years later, the invitation stands.

In the end, you and I are exactly like John. We have beheld the glory of God in the sacraments, in the sacred Scriptures, in the hungry and thirsty in our midst. And yet we have also suffered the darkness of ecclesial scandal and of a loveless age drunk on power and prestige. We have suffered from illness, sickness and death.

Like John, we can cry out to Jesus, asking Him to identify Himself as the Messiah, to make His presence known not only in signs but in actions. And we can announce the belovedness of the Lamb of God by remaining faithful to Jesus, even in the darkness of our lives. John's confession, when it has force and when it fumbles, is ours, too! You and I are called to be light to the nations. Hold your lantern high! AMEN!