

St Pius & St Anthony 2nd Sunday Ordinary Time Homily 2026 Year A

John the Baptist again today (last Sunday was Feast of the Lord's Baptism!) I guess we just can't get enough of John's modelling of humility! But two puzzling things pop up in today's gospel: John's enigmatic saying that sounded like a biblical version of the old Abbot & Costello skit, 'Who's on first?', and then John's denial twice of 'knowing Jesus'? What's all that mean?

Well, the rise of a successor, replacement of a leader can be a tricky time. There can be backward hangers on to the old, or forward going even some sabotage or outright rejection of the new. and precarious process. A popular author named Robert Greene has written a series of books on leadership and success, one called '48 Laws of Power', another called '33 Strategies of War' and one just titled 'Mastery' with lots of success lessons. In his book on power, his first law of power is "Shine, but not too bright.", reminding the reader that there is only one leader at a time - Only one sun –rest of stars disappear when the sun is out. Looking at history of rulers, many a brilliant subject is snuffed out by an insecure, or dull superior.

His work can be read as a 'survival guide' for how intelligent subordinates survive under an incompetent superior. Greene uses an example of how Galileo survived and kept his funding, serving under his patron Cosimo de Medici, when Cosimo I, came to power he dedicated his throne to Jupiter (*so pagan & so prideful- Jupiter being largest planet!*) but when Galileo's research advanced, his new invention of the telescope (paid for by Medici) Galileo discovered Jupiter's moons. Afraid that talk (attn) would be greater about his discovery than Cosimo's biggest planet (eclipsing Medici's brand), Jupiter threatening his funding, Galileo dedicated his telescope's use at the king's use with a coat of arms, showing Jupiter being orbited by its four moons (*Cosimo I had 4 children-dynasty!*) by ascribing the appearance of the moons as a cosmic signs coincident with Medicis rise to power, It worked so well, that Galileo was made house philosopher w/ tenured funding! Surviving by flying under the tyrant's jealousy radar! So such gentle maneuvering is what is needed so often to in transition times going forward, good for everyone.

We see something of this awkward moment (during a transfer of attention and authority from one leader to another) in the exchange between John the Baptist and Jesus. Recall from last weeks' reading, the humble resistance of John, when Jesus showed up for baptism. John deferred completely to Jesus, "You should baptize me". He gave Jesus the wheel – Jesus is driving. John knows he is a servant of the Lord – so he's quick to step down, scale back his role. How many times, John announces such self-deprecating statements: as 'I am not worthy to

untie/carry his sandals' (Jn 1:27) 'I only baptize with water, He will with fire & Holy Spirit' (Mk 1:8); 'I must decrease he must increase' (Jn 3:30). It is in John's spirit of such humility we understand that enigmatic statement, "*A man coming after me who ranks ahead of me because he existed before me.*" (Jn 1:30). So, WHAT is that saying? John is saying that, even though he is the Elder to Jesus, seemingly the Teacher of Jesus, (the 'Great' on whose shoulder we who come after stand on) even though John is on the scene first, in fact, Jesus, the last on scene-the 'newby' johnny come lately, is the one in charge, the greater! (*interestingly, even before Jesus teaches it, John ushers in an example of the 'last being first'*). So, even as Jesus appears later in time, as a graduate of John's School, Jesus is actually the primary teacher. John is saying, 'the one who comes in my wake is actually my driving force pushing this whole movement forward.' I hear John's statement to be communicating the same sentiment that the great later poet William Wordswoth means when he writes, "The child is Father to the Man"!

When we consider John's true humility displayed here, then that other puzzle in our gospel makes sense, too. What is John getting at, by twice saying, "I didn't know him"? We know John knows Jesus (he is kinfolk according to Luke 1:39-45). So of course, John knew Jesus., but what is John trying to say by insisting he 'didn't know Jesus'? Well, John is humbly saying that it is no credit to him, that he points out the Messiah, Jesus. John is not himself naming a successor in his 'baptist movement' - he is not a kingmaker, wisely selecting the most likely next leader. NO, this is all God's doing. God told John who to pick, God led John to spotlight Jesus at the right moment – why the other witnesses show up too- the Holy spirit dove and heavenly father's voice that commanded Jesus' coronation. John is no cunning kingpin installing a minion of his choosing to keep his name on top (like Herod's dynasty runs the table). This is why John points out Jesus and then John disappears, which he will -shortly after this, John is arrested by Herod and eventually beheaded/martyred by Herod.

I got to see first-hand such a transition one time. There is a practice in convents/monasteries, when monks/nuns select a new mother superior or abbot father, the previous one will leave for a while, go on mission or take a sabbatical. When I was in seminary, (early 1990's), the Passionist sisters in Owensboro (*when still at old place downtown-most of us knew them then, as the makers of our Eucharistic hosts for majority of the Diocese*), elected a new mother superior. So the previous one left the convent for a sabbatical at St Meinrad for a year while I was there. I got to know Sr Margaret Mary, through some great road conversations, as she at times needed a ride to Owensboro for some business, and I'd drop her off at monastery and then pick her up end of day back to St Meinrad. But her stepping away from

the monastery was for purpose of giving the new mother superior space to establish her own style leadership without the any interfering deference that the old's presence would cause if still present. So, that is why John points Jesus out, steps back and then disappears.

But what does all that mean for us? It reminds us that we serve something greater. That God is in charge for us, and that God can rule through the humility of His subjects. We lead best when we serve God. Since it is this weekend, I add that Dr Martin Luther King Jr, often would say something like, "Everyone is clamoring to be the leader....well, anyone can lead, step up and lead others by example." Be the good you want done (yes maybe just one life at a time – but that's still a difference!). We who follow Jesus, can imitate that humility of John, by serving God (being a servant leader), not any credit to us, but acknowledging that any good from us, actually, is God working in us. That all we do is for the service and glory of God.