



THE MISSION OF SAINT MARY MAGDALENE

Father Alan's Blog

For the Fourth Sunday in Advent - December 19, 2021

"I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'"

St. John 1:23 (KJV)

If someone were to ask you:



"Who are you?",

how would you respond?

Years ago, my wife and I liked to watch country videos on CMT. One of our favourites was for a song called "Who I Am", written by Brett James and Troy Verges, and recorded by American country music artist Jessica Andrews. Its rather catchy chorus went like this:

*"I am Rosemary's granddaughter,
The spitting image of my father,
And when the day is done
My mamma's still my biggest fan.
Sometimes I'm clueless and I'm clumsy,
But I've got friends who love me
And they know just where I stand.
It's all a part of me,
And that's who I am."*



However, if someone were to ask you:



“Who ARE you?”,

how would you respond?

In Stave 1, entitled “Marley’s Ghost”, of Charles Dickens’ 1843 classic Christmas story, “A Christmas Carol”, when the *“incredulous”*, yet *“caustic and cold as ever”* miser Ebenezer Scrooge first encounters the ghost of his *“died-seven-years-ago-this-very-night”* business partner, Jacob Marley, the scene unfolds as follows when he asks:

“Who ARE you?”

(Marley’s ghost replies) ‘Ask me who I WAS.’

‘Who WERE you then?’ said Scrooge, raising his voice. ‘You’re particular for a shade.’ He was going to say ‘TO a shade,’ but substituted this, as more appropriate.

(Finally, the spectre gives the answer Scrooge originally sought) ‘In life I was your partner, Jacob Marley.’”



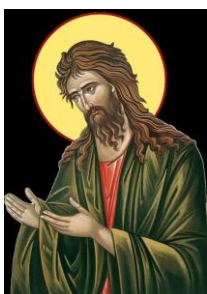
Even so, if someone were to ask you:



“Who are YOU?”,

how would you respond?

In today’s Gospel Lesson from St. John 1:19-29, St. John the Baptist was asked similar questions by some “prying” priests and Levites (Pharisees all), who were sent by the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem (a.k.a. the Temple authorities, or “Sanhedrin”) to spy on:



John; and



his activities,



and to report back to them.

Being the “ultra-conservative” wing of the Sanhedrin, the Pharisees believed in following, not only “The Torah” – that is to say, “The Pentateuch”, or the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures:



Genesis;



Exodus;



Leviticus;



Numbers; and



Deuteronomy

(as, by the way, did the Sadducees, the “ultra-liberal” wing of the Sanhedrin, who ONLY acknowledged the Torah) – but, rather, all the Hebrew Scriptures including the:

LAW

Genesis

Exodus

Leviticus

Numbers

Deuteronomy **Law;**

PROPHETS

Former Prophets { Joshua
Judges
1-2 Samuel
1-2 Kings

Latter Prophets { Isaiah
Jeremiah
Ezekiel
The Twelve

Prophets; and

WRITINGS

Psalms

Pre-Exilic Writings { Job
Proverbs
Ruth
Song of Songs
Ecclesiastes

Post-Exilic Writings { Lamentations
Esther
Daniel
Ezra-Nehemiah
1-2 Chronicles

Writings,

meaning that they put great emphasis on meticulously obeying:



the Laws of Moses (all 613 of them!);



their interpretations and applications (as per the multi-volume “Talmud”, or sacred Jewish text);



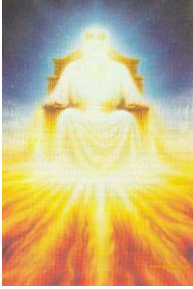
as well as the beliefs and traditions based thereon (most notably, the resurrection),

and were, predictably, resistant to change – ANY change – especially any change that would impact on how the so-called religious Temple authorities conducted their “business”.)

Anyway, this particular scene – with more than a few parallels to that between Ebenezer Scrooge (a.k.a. the Pharisees) and Jacob Marley’s ghost (a.k.a. St. John the Baptist) – unfolds in verses 19-21 as follows:

“Now this was John’s testimony when the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, ‘I am not the Christ (or Messiah).’ They asked him, ‘Then who are you? Are you Elijah?’ He said, ‘I am not.’ ‘Are you the Prophet?’ He answered, ‘No.’”

(Note that John’s responses to the Pharisee’s queries got progressively shorter. For St. John the Baptist’s Divinely-appointed calling was to “pave the way” for – and to testify about – Jesus of Nazareth as:



The Messiah, and



“The Lamb of God”,

PERIOD.)

Nevertheless, the Pharisees – who worried that John, in calling the people to repentance (thereby making the smug Temple authorities look bad, as they were failing miserably in their Divinely-appointed calling to do so) persisted in asking him about himself; hence, John’s answers to them became more terse and increasingly impatient.)

First of all, John responded:



“I am not the Messiah.”

in answer to their first question re: just who exactly John was (as the Messiah’s coming had been foretold for centuries by numerous Hebrew prophets and – as far as the Sanhedrin were concerned, anyway – represented **more than a potential threat** to the status quo of the godless Temple authorities’ selfish and sinful machinations).

Secondly, John retorted:



“I am not.”

in reference to the Pharisees’ question as to whether he was Elijah, the prophet. (Because the Jews remembered that Elijah had not died but was taken directly into heaven, as per 1 Kings 2:11, they believed that he would come back to earth to announce the end time. In this sense, John properly denied that he was Elijah. Later, when Jesus said that John the Baptist was, in fact, “Elijah” (St. Matthew 11:14; 17:10-13), He meant it in the sense that John was the fulfillment of Malachi’s prophecy (in 4:5-6 of his book – as found in the book of “The Twelve”, a subsection of the “Latter Prophets”), as part of his foretelling of God’s judgement and covenant renewal on the “Day of the Lord”:

“See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction.”

Thirdly (and probably more than a little “testily”) John replied a flat:



“No.”

in response to the Pharisees query re: John being “The Prophet” (as foretold in Deuteronomy 18:15, 18):

“THE LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your fellow Israelites. You must listen to him...

I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their fellow Israelites, and I will put my words in his mouth. He will tell them everything I command him."

(In short, therefore, for hundreds of years the Jews had been expecting a number of people to be associated with the Messiah's coming.)

In any event, the now-exasperated Pharisees finally got to the point of their "spy mission", by bluntly asking John the Baptist (in verse 22) to describe himself (and, hopefully, to reveal himself as a "threat"):



"Finally they said, 'Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those that sent us. What do you say about yourself?'"

Note that in his reply (verse 23), the humble, yet faithful, Baptist still insisted on shifting the focus from himself to the Purpose (or Person) of his ministry, God's long-promised Messiah:



"John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet (in 40:3 of his 'Latter Prophets' book), 'I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.''"

echoing what John's own father, Zechariah had prophesied about his newly-born son's eventual ministry, part of "Zechariah's Song", or the "Benedictus" (as found in St. Luke 1:68-90, which is recited daily as part of Mattins), verses 75-80 specifically:



*“AND thou, child, shalt be called the Prophet of
the Highest:/
for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to
prepare his ways;
To give knowledge of salvation unto his people/
for the remission of their sins;
Through the tender mercy of our God;/
whereby the day-spring on high hath visited us;
To give light to them that sit in darkness, and in
the shadow of death,/
and to guide our feet into the way of peace...”*



So again, as we prepare for our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ's arrival, I must know:

If someone were to ask each one of us:



“Who are you?”,

how would we each respond?

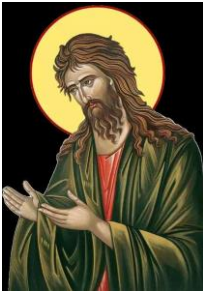


as the person each of us is, and



as a **Christian?**

Maybe – just maybe – it might be possible for each and every one of us to muster up the courage **to be both**, by making the deliberate choice to become a modern-day:



“John the Baptist-Elijah-Prophet-Child of God”,

and instantly – and instinctively – reply:

“I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way for the Lord.’”

Indeed:

“Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly.”



Dearest Reader in Christ:

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