



THE MISSION OF SAINT MARY MAGDALENE

Father Alan's Blog

For the Third Sunday in Advent – December 12, 2021

“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him and who have been called according to His purpose.”

Romans 8:28 (NIV)

Life can be full of:



trials & tribulations; and



traumas.

Consider the following excerpt from Chapter 1 of Max Lucado's 1991 book, "In the Eye of the Storm":

“Chippie the parakeet never saw it coming. One second he was peacefully perched in his cage. The next he was sucked in, washed up, and blown over.

“The problems began when Chippie's owner decided to clean Chippie's cage with a vacuum cleaner. She removed the attachment from the end of the hose and stuck it in the cage. The phone rang, and she turned to pick it up. She'd barely said 'hello' when 'ssssopp!' Chippie got sucked in.

"The bird owner gasped, put down the phone, turned off the vacuum, and opened the bag. There was Chippie - still alive, but stunned. Since the bird was covered with dust and soot, she grabbed him and raced to the bathroom, turned on the faucet, and held Chippie under the running water. Then, realizing that Chippie was soaked and shivering, she did what any compassionate bird owner would do ... she reached for the hair dryer and blasted the pet with hot air.

"Poor Chippie never knew what hit him.

"A few days after the trauma, the reporter who'd initially written about the event contacted Chippie's owner to see how the bird was recovering. 'Well,' she replied, 'Chippie doesn't sing much anymore - he just sits and stares.'

"It's hard not to see why. Sucked in, washed up, and blown over... That's enough to steal the song from the stoutest heart."

Life can also be full of:



tragedies.

Irish poet and playwright Oscar Wilde was once quoted as saying:

"In this world there are only two tragedies. One is not getting what one wants, and the other is getting it."



Certainly, being a Christian is a blessing. Nevertheless, this world is under a curse. Thus, the outcome of our best efforts is often not for what we had hoped (or had asked), as:



things go wrong; or



plans fail; or



tragedy strikes; or



death takes its toll.

Accordingly, pain can be a huge part of our everyday lives. Despite Holy Scripture repeatedly telling us that we (as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ) can have joy in all our:



trials & tribulations;



traumas; and



tragedies,

(and, also, according to St. Paul in Romans 8:28 that:



God works through everything for ultimate good),

sometimes we are not able to see it.

Hence, some days our faith wanes, and we wonder just where God is. Take, for instance, John the Baptist, regarding whom our Lord Jesus said (St. Matthew 11:11):

“Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist...”

Moreover, all four Gospels confirm that John was a great preacher:



bold and courageous.

He even went so far as to challenge the morals of King Herod Antipas, by very publicly calling out Herod’s adultery with Herodias, his own brother Phillip’s wife. (Can you imagine telling Queen Elizabeth II that not only is she an adulteress, but that she is not right with God either? Well, if you do, don’t expect to be invited to say Grace at the dinner table at Buckingham Palace any time soon. In John’s day, though, one could rightly expect to land in prison:



which he did,

as we read in today’s Gospel Lesson from St. Matthew 11:2-10). In short, this is the end of the road for John the Baptist; he is living his final days in what must seem like:



failure; and



embarrassment; and



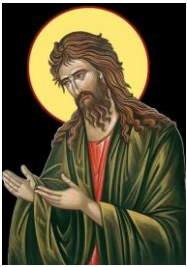
shame.

Up to now, John had lived his entire life for the Lord; in fact, St. Luke affirms (in 1:41 of his Gospel) that John was filled with the Spirit of God when yet in his mother Elizabeth's womb:

“And it happened when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary that the babe leaped in her womb...”

Additionally, as a Nazarite, John the Baptist was set aside at birth to be “a prophet of the Most High” – a **forerunner**, if you will – for God's long-promised Messiah (as attested to by St. Luke 1:76-79, and again, in 3:4-6, in quoting Isaiah 40:3-5).

So, let's make no mistake about it:



John the Baptist had spent his ENTIRE LIFE living in strict obedience to God's will,

But now we find John spending his final days in King Herod's prison, as the laughingstock of the nation. And the fact of the matter is, things are not going to get any better for him; for example, we don't read later on in any of the Gospels that John is miraculously rescued from prison:



no angel releases him (like St. Peter in Acts 12); and



no earthquake frees him (like Sts. Paul and Silas in Acts 16).



No, John is going to die in Herod's prison.

(Eventually, John the Baptist will be beheaded at the adulterous hands of King Herod, his equally-adulterous wife, Herodias, and his provocative teen-age stepdaughter, Salome.)



So, why do we even read about John the Baptist today, the “Third Sunday in Advent”? Because today is also known as “Gaudete Sunday” or “Rejoice Sunday” (“Gaudete” being Latin for “Rejoice”, the first word of today’s Introit Psalm 33). Also, despite the otherwise somber readings of the Advent season (which tend to stress the need for penitence), today’s Propers emphasize the joyous anticipation of our Lord Jesus’ coming (thus, given today’s more joyful tone, the rose colored candle on the Advent Wreath is lit).

In addition (believe it or not), John the Baptist’s life, especially in these final stages, is meant to serve as a joyful example in the face of adversity for those of us who attempt to follow in his footsteps, apart from the perplexity that John must have been feeling as he sat rotting in Herod’s cold, dank, prison cell – for, without a doubt, John was having more than a few serious doubts about whether **Jesus of Nazareth was really WHO HE CLAIMED TO BE**. Accordingly, please allow me to paraphrase verses 2-3 of today’s Gospel Lesson, wherein John instructs his disciples as follows:



“Go to that guy we THOUGHT was the Messiah (you know, my second cousin, Jesus of Nazareth?), and ask Him if He really IS the Messiah, or should we start looking elsewhere?!?”)

Please permit me to ask a quick question:

Was there ever a time during John the Baptist’s ministry when he knew – **for a fact** – that Jesus was the Messiah? Sure there was! Who (in St. John 1:29b) walked before Jesus declaring:



“Behold the Lamb of God, Who taketh away the sin of the world?”

Who was it that said that?

Did John the Baptist have any doubts then?

So, why now?



Because John is in an ice-cold prison and times are tough, that’s why!!!

John is used to being in better circumstances. Besides, he must have envisioned a better end than THIS – and prison was certainly not a part of his plan. In a word, John is in a deep valley, with no mountain in sight; consequently, in effect, he is saying – **pleading**, in fact:

“Jesus, if You’re REALLY the Messiah, why am I in here? Don’t tell me this is part of the script! Why is it happening this way?”



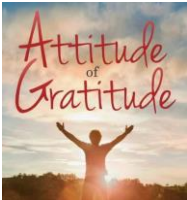
Many Christians live for Jesus Christ for years and years, and, at times (during what some might call “Glory Days”), they see Him work powerfully in their lives and in His Church. Mostly, though, through the seemingly-never-ending cycle of spiritual ups and downs, these same Christians tend to learn and grow in their “faith walk” by “rolling with the ecclesiastical punches”. But, as a result, over time, ever so gradually, imperceptibly (yet predictably), things slow down for them spiritually. The excitement they felt when Jesus first touched their hearts wanes, causing:



their spiritual freshness to *fade*;



their vision for God to *diminish*; and



their attitude of gratitude to *weaken*.

Therefore, many Christians often find their faith lives on a downhill grade picking up speed – all because the victories and mountaintops of yesterday **did not lead all the way to heaven after all!** Believing that the “Glory Days” at their church were all-too-short-lived (not to mention that a number of new generations have come and gone and

still the “Glory Days” haven’t returned since **forever** – and, now, probably never will happen again), many Christians have grown cynical and have adopted a mindset – and “heartset” – of unyielding uncertainty. In a nutshell, they experience continual **doubtstorms**.



(Which, by the way, is precisely what happened to John the Baptist.)



Now, I don’t know about you, but this gives me a great deal of **comfort** to know that even a man of his stature (as great as he was), John the Baptist, in times of difficult circumstances and crippling depression, experienced his own doubtstorm. It tells me that I’m **NORMAL** – that I’m not a spiritual freak for having low times!

Mark this down:



If John the Baptist (that is, the same person who Jesus described as “*among-those-born-of-women-there-has-not-risen-anyone-greater*”) experienced a doubtstorm, then we will all endure doubtstorms.

Anyone who has believed in Jesus Christ, for any length of time, can think of periods when he or she had doubtstorms:



about God’s love (“*If you love me God why am going through this?*”); or



about God's power (*"Why don't You fix this situation Lord?"*); or



about God's justice (*"How can You let them get away with that Lord?"*); or



about Jesus' return (*"Will the rapture happen in my lifetime - or at all?"*); or



About one's salvation (*"How do I know that I'm really going to heaven?"*)

We can all take solace in the fact (rejoice, even!) that:



all believers have doubtstorms at some time during their earthly journeys.

Furthermore, doubtstorms tend to come precisely when we're in:



a deep, foreboding valley; or



a dark, frozen prison.

So what is our prison? Is it:



personal finances; or



family problems; or



marital conflict; or



physical / mental / spiritual illness; or



disappointment / discouragement / depression?

Or, perhaps, some combination of these.

And as we've sat in our dark, dank, ice-cold prison cells, chances are pretty good that we – like John the Baptist before us – have thought things like:

“Jesus, what gives? You know that I've done all that I know to do. I've tried to be faithful. I've tried to serve you. I know I'm not perfect, Lord but at least I'm trying! So just what are YOU going to do to help me?”

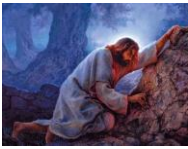
Or to quote John the Baptist himself (St. Matthew 11:3):

“Art Thou He that should come, or are we to look for another?”

Let me give you, in a word, the reason for John the Baptist's, um, “perplexity”. Because Jesus of Nazareth had not lived up to John's

pre-conceived notion of what God's Messiah should be and should do, John began to have severe doubts. For, in his mind, John had created a mold into which Jesus should fit, and when Jesus didn't, it caused John to experience a doubtstorm.

(In reality, though, John the Baptist didn't have "The Big Picture" – that is, John had an incomplete revelation of Who God is and of how he, as a mere human, fit into God's overall divine plan.) In short, John did not understand that Jesus (as Saviour) came the first time:



to suffer; and



to bleed; and



to die

for our sins. And that the NEXT time Jesus (as Lord) came, He would:



judge the nations (separating the "sheep" from the "goats", if you will); and then



set up His eternal kingdom.

What's more, it was precisely this lack of understanding of not being able to see "The Big Picture" that caused John the Baptist to have

serious doubts – namely, to experience his doubtstorm.



Now, notice the tact and the tenderness that Jesus uses when responding to John, in verses 4-5 of today's Gospel Lesson. Jesus quotes a prophecy from Isaiah 35:5-6 written 725 years before.

(By the way, I find this particular passage of Holy Scripture to be most comforting, as it assures me that during my own doubtstorms, God understands and is in complete control of the situation.)

"Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then shall the lame man leap as an hart and the tongue of the dumb sing."

Jesus tells John's disciples to go back to John and tell him these things because Jesus knows that John will immediately recognize them as the very credentials that God's Messiah was to manifest. Also, tactfully, yet tenderly, Jesus adds (verse 6):

"Blessed or happy is the person who trusts Me or is not angry with me or does not doubt me even when he doesn't understand."

In the same vein, I am reminded of what an inspired poet once anonymously confessed:

*"My life is but a weaving between my Lord and me.
I cannot choose the colors He worketh steadily.
Oft times He weaveth sorrow and I in foolish pride
Forget He sees the upper and I the underside.
Not till the loom is silent and the shuttle ceases to fly
Shall God unroll the canvas and explain the reason why."*

In his dark, dank, ice-cold prison cell, John the Baptist could no longer see the good. He could no longer see Jesus. All he could see were the dire circumstances around him.

Similarly, while we are here on earth all we can see are the “underside” of things:



the tragedy; and



the loss; and



the heartbreak; and



the sorrow.

But someday soon, when our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ comes for the second and final time, our loving Heavenly Father will unroll the canvas for us. And as finally we discern “The Big Picture”, we will joyfully exclaim:

“Oh, now I see! Now I understand why you had to use those dark colours over here! And insert those bland areas over there it’s the only way it could have worked! Now I see the Big Picture! Wow! All things really DO work together for good !”

We just need to hold fast to these encouraging words from St. Paul (Romans 8:28), as alluded to earlier:

“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him and who have been called according to His purpose.”

Or as Andrew Murray was quoted as saying by Amy Carmichael in her 1995 book, “Though the Mountains Shake”:



First, He brought me here, it is by His will I am in this strait place: in that fact I will rest.



Next, He will keep me here in His love, and give me grace to behave as His child.



Then, He will make the trial a blessing, teaching me the lessons He intends me to learn, and working in me the grace He means to bestow.



Last, In His good time He can bring me out again – how and when He knows.



So, until the glorious Day of the Lord arrives, let us keep:



our eyes;



our hearts; and



our minds,

firmly and faithfully fixed on Jesus – and on His will for us and for our lives (particularly on those days when we find ourselves smack-dab in the middle of ice-cold spiritual prisons where doubtstorms, born of getting – or not getting – what we want, are on the horizon).

Because for us to do otherwise:



that would be the real tragedy.

“Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly.”



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