

7. January 2025

Biblical meditations  
THE GOSPEL OF ST. JOHN  
"The testimony of the Baptist"

Jn 1:19-34

*And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed, he did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Eli'jah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" And he answered, "No" They said to him then, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said" Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, "Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Eli'jah, nor the prophet?" John answered them, "I baptize with water; but among you stands one whom you do not know, even he who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." This took place in Bethany beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing.*

*The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks before me, for he was before me.' I myself did not know him; but for this I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel." And John bore witness, "I saw the Spirit descend as a dove from heaven, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him; but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God."*

Here is the crucial question that the priests and Levites asked John: "Who are you?" No doubt they had heard of him and knew that he used very clear language, as we hear in this passage from Matthew's Gospel: "When John saw many of the Pharisees and Sad'ducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" (Mt 3:7).

Who, then, was this ascetic who spoke so strongly and to whom so many people came to be baptised? Was he the Christ, the expected Messiah, or Elijah, or the prophet? "I am not", he answered them.

In fact, John had already recognised the expected Messiah. God Himself had revealed Him to John, and from this knowledge the Baptist could better understand his own mission. Everything he did and said was to prepare the way for the One of whom he himself said: *"the thong of his sandal I am not worthy to untie."* His mission was to bear witness to Him, and when Jesus began His public ministry, John took a back seat: *"He must increase, but I must decrease"* (Jn 3:30). His purpose was not to gain prestige among the people or to be in the limelight. On the contrary, John saw himself as the "voice crying in the wilderness", preparing the way for the Messiah. That is what he lived for!

That is the mark of a true prophet: He always puts himself in the background, behind his Lord, and does not want to draw attention to himself. He wants to make God known to people and is willing to do anything to do it. This is his life and he simply wants to be a voice that testifies to the glory and greatness of God. This is the vocation that God has entrusted to him, and he wants to fulfil it with profound authenticity and unmistakable clarity. Let us listen again to the testimony that John, a true prophet, gives about Jesus: *"this is the Son of God."*

But not all who come in the name of the Lord are true prophets. In fact, Jesus Himself warns us about false prophets: *"For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and they will lead many astray"* (Mt 24:5).

This is still happening today. So how do we know whether we are dealing with a false prophet or a true prophet?

We will recognise the true prophet by the same characteristics that distinguish John the Baptist. He will lead us to the One who is the Son of God and will claim nothing for himself. No true prophet would question the testimony of the Baptist and the apostles about Jesus, nor would he claim to have knowledge superior to that which has been revealed to us. Just as John proclaimed the imminent coming of the Messiah, a true prophet today would proclaim that this Messiah has already come into the world to redeem all mankind. Not a new Messiah will come, but the One Messiah will return in the end times.

A true prophet would not deviate one iota from what God has already revealed, nor could he disregard the doctrine of the Church without becoming a false prophet.

A false prophet, on the other hand, having fallen into deception himself, becomes a "deceived deceiver" in conveying his false doctrines to the people. He does not diminish himself for the Lord's increase, nor does he understand his ministry as a simple service for the glory of God.

These characteristics will be particularly evident in the False Prophet, who will prepare and assist the coming and reign of the Antichrist.

The testimony of the Baptist and the tradition of the Apostles are a sure heritage for the faithful to remain faithful to the faith and not to be deceived: "Jesus is the Son of God".