

rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer with him and for his sake. What they had pledged themselves to, we also have promised in our baptism. We have renounced the devil and all his works and all his pomps and in doing so we have pledged a complete and wholehearted obedience to Christ. We have undertaken to die to sin that we may live by and in him. So in return for our obedience, loyalty and love, Christ by his power will reign and rule in our hearts, giving us here and now the life which will bring us one day to life eternal.

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We announce with some regret that as from next January the annual subscription to THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT will be raised to 25s. post free, single copies 2/- each. As subscriptions become renewable they will be booked at the new rate. This has been made an absolute necessity by the steady increase, over the past two years, of the cost of printing and production.

We announce also that the general theme of the January number will be *Christian Unity*.



## ST JOHN THE BAPTIST

IVO THOMAS, O.P.

**I**N Advent we go back to the very beginning of the Gospel, to St John the Baptist and his message. He has been called the school-master of the Apostles, and later apostles and preachers ought to study no less intently in his school. First, because he was the fore-runner of our blessed Lord, come to make his path straight and smooth before him. He was the remover of obstacles in that path, that would be in the way when the Lord came. This is not the highest power, but a very necessary one. His work was not so much that of a sacrament, which confers grace, as of a sacramental. The preaching and teaching, the rites and ceremonies of religious life with its special clothes and organization, is of the same kind. All that has the power of disposing men to come to our Lord; it stands as a witness to his truth and goodness. Like St John who was a burning and a shining light, modern apostles too must be *vera lumina*,

satellites reflecting the rays of our Lord who is the *lux mundi*.

More particularly, St John the Baptist was the fore-runner because he taught penance. The light cannot reach souls so long as darkness is kept there. It shines indeed, but the darkness does not comprehend it. The first appeal must be to the conscience that it be cleansed from sin. Wills must be stirred to detest sin. They can only actually do this under the impulse of grace, for between sin and grace there is no halfway house or no man's land. At one and the same moment God gives charity and contrition, love of himself and hatred of sin, but he employs all ordinary means naturally suited to human activity, to prepare for this interior and supernatural work. Minds and wills are naturally moved by consideration and exhortation and example; these God uses to abase the hills of pride and fill up the valleys of despondency that would impede the path of his entry. As St Gregory says in his homily *Designavit*: 'The Lord follows his preachers: because preaching comes first, and when the words of exhortation run before and through them truth is received into the mind, then the Lord comes to our soul's dwelling. Therefore indeed it is that Isaias says to preachers: Prepare the way of the Lord; make straight the paths of our God.'

St John bore his witness both by his life and by his voice. His message of repentance is a hard one, but the people take to it; he has not treated them gently, calling them a viper's brood, but still he has stirred them to thoughts of something beyond this world, of a power that has no respect for their natural pretensions, of a judge who will deal with them finally, remorselessly, by absolute standards. 'Bring forth fruits worthy of penance, and do not begin to say "We have Abraham for our father." For I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children to Abraham. For now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that bringeth not forth good fruit, shall be cut down, and cast into the fire.' Ancestors, family, natural inheritance of qualities and talents are of no avail when one is in the presence of the supreme judge. The self-centred 'child of Abraham' is simply claiming to be what he is by nature, and if the conscience will not look beyond that, it is only assailable through those dictates of natural reason which are bound up with its very nature as reason. That certainly was the Baptist's approach. The common people, the publicans and

the soldiers, hearing his stern call to repentance came and asked him for more detailed guidance. 'What then shall *we* do?' He answered them perhaps more gently than the manner of his general proclamation may have led them to expect. That gaunt, ascetic figure, in its robe of hair, bearing the marks of fasting and rigorous self-discipline has succeeded in awing them with his message. At the same time he had braced and stimulated their relaxed souls and they had dared to approach closer to him. He received them with gentleness, and speaks plainly and simply to them of elementary duties. 'He wanted', says St John Chrysostom, 'to lead them on to higher wisdom, but as they were not yet fitted for that, he unlocks lesser treasures, lest if he produced more valuable ones they might reach after them in vain and lose all.'

To the common people he speaks of the common compassion that should unite individuals of the same kind: 'He that hath two coats, let him give to him that hath none; and he that hath meat let him do in like manner.' The publicans, whose temptation was not so much the primary greeds for food and clothing as greed for money, he bids keep clear the distinction between what was theirs and what belonged to other people: 'Do (i.e. exact) nothing more than that which is appointed you.' The strength of the Roman soldier belonged of right to the imperial system of law which he was in the country to enforce. As a soldier he was an official, a servant of the law and the public good. John tells them not to use their strength for their private ends: 'Do violence to no man'; not to misuse their official position: 'neither calumniate any man' (i.e. lay no false accusation); and not to plunder the people among whom they are stationed: 'Be content with your pay'. Those who take such advice will not have done very much; these are common, elementary principles of natural reason. 'He unlocks', says Chrysostom, 'the lesser treasures.'

It is understandable that all those people should flock to hear St John the Baptist and ask his counsel, for he was a doctor who evidently used his own medicine and thrived on it. A man of great innocence, he none the less, but rather the more, practised an extreme of asceticism and self-denial. He accustomed himself to live in that solitude in which alone great energies and the loftiest thoughts are matured, with the simplest and roughest of clothing, the scantiest diet, apart from the traffic of men, dependent on the least bounties of nature for his needs. Naturally his

appearance and manner, born of such a life, and wholly in conformity with his message, added tremendous authority to what he said. Detestation of sin and some degree of mortification are absolutely necessary ingredients in any life that is to be directed towards God. They are incumbent with an extra and special urgency on those whose mission it is to preach these necessities to others. In their case too, their lives, like the Baptist's, must preach as much as their words.

### BALLADE OF ST JOHN THE BAPTIST

- The desert soon shall, as the lily, flower; *Is. 35, 1*  
 Leopard with kid and wolf with lamb shall lie; *Is. 11, 6*  
 A little child shall hold them in his power  
 And fearless the serpent's hold espy; *Is. 11, 8*  
 The calf and bear each unto other nigh *Is. 11, 7*  
 Shall with their young feed in the self-same land,  
 But first from Jordan's banks there comes a cry:  
 'Do penance, for God's kingdom is at hand.' *Mt. 3, 2*  
 Can thorns bear grapes or thistles figs, before *cf. Mt. 7, 16*  
 The native rancour that is in them die?  
 Can we make ploughshares from the tools of war *Is. 2, 4; Mich. 4, 3*  
 Till passion stills, and foes with foes ally?  
 Ye children of the Hebrews, doubt not why  
 John comes in camel's hair to Jordan's strand,  
 But his example to yourselves apply,  
 Do penance, for God's kingdom is at hand.
- Soldier and publican and Pharisee *Mt. 3*  
 On Jordan's brink for rites baptismal vic;  
 And in the desert all Judea would be, *Lc. 3*  
 Each one the Baptist's lore intent to try.  
 'Who from the wrath to come hath bid you fly,  
 You brood of vipers? Ere the chaff is fanned',  
 Thus to his questioners he makes reply,  
 'Do penance, for God's kingdom is at hand.'

### ENVOI

- Prince, who of Israel art the Prince confessed,  
 And for an ensign of the folk dost stand, *Is. 11, 10*  
 May we, it being also thy behest, *Mt. 1, 15*  
 Do penance, for thy kingdom is at hand.