

11.12.67

Ps 116 Tape

'Jesus began to speak ...' MATT 11⁶⁻¹⁰ [Prayer for 4. Ch. p 21]

From the Gospel of St Matthew, part of the reading at Mass yesterday, the 2nd Sunday of Advent. Let's ask the help and intercession of St John the Baptist now, as we pray and in our turn prepare for the coming of Christ.

PRAYERS

Handel's "Messiah" has made familiar to many of us, in English, the text from the prophet Isaiah which St Matthew sees fulfilled in the person and work of St John the Baptist. Here now is part of another setting of those words, in an Advent motet. As it's 16th century polyphonic church music, the text is in Latin; but as we listen to the unfamiliar music and words, we can at least prayerfully ponder the message and meaning of the words: "Sound the trumpet in Zion, for the day of the Lord is near. Behold he comes for our salvation: the crooked shall be made straight and the rough places level. Come, Lord, and do not delay. Let the heavens drop dew from above and let the clouds rain justice. Let the earth be opened - bring forth a Saviour. Slow us, Lord, Thy mercy and give us Thy salvation. Come Lord and do not delay."

"There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came for testimony, to bear witness to the light, that all might believe through him."

"And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins..."

These are the inspired words of the gospels about the man of whom Jesus said that no greater man had ever been born into this world. We are forcefully reminded of him in this 2nd week of preparation for Christ's coming, by the gospel read at yesterday's Mass. John the Baptist, the baptiser, was historically the immediate preparation for the revealing of Christ present among God's people - so he's also for us, preparing for Christmas and preparing the way for the Lord in the world around us, an important figure. He's a rather mysterious figure, in the gospels, cropping up time and again throughout the whole story of Christ's work and preaching; he seems to be always there, in the background mostly, but obviously very influential. He really belongs to the Old Testament, the last and the greatest of the prophets, the one who

really makes the bridge between promise and fulfillment. He preaches repentance in preparation for the Lord's coming, as all the prophets did — and the Lord is actually there. John saw and recognized Him, pointed him out to his own close disciples who thereupon left him, to become the disciples and the apostles of a new Master. Like most of the prophets, despite, or maybe because of his last ascetical life, he became very popular — all sorts of unlikely people went out into the desert along the banks of the Jordan, to consult him. And as ~~the~~ Jesus suggested, and as happened with other prophets before him, his message was not understood. They ~~heard~~ ^{heard} him preach repentance, they saw his way of life, the way he dressed, the strong unbinding character and principles of the man — but it was a 9-day wonder. Because of his message and integrity, he offended some sensitive and none too upright skins, as other prophets did — and paid for it with his head. As Christ said of him, he was more than a prophet; he was Elias come back to earth to precede Christ himself. His one aim and purpose was to point the way to Christ — to physically point out Christ for those who could see. But even some of his own disciples were jealous of this new teacher who'd appeared. John's purpose was to make

himself superfluous, to fade out of the picture so that the light of Christ might shine on all men: to prepare men's hearts, smoothing out the roughness, so that they would accept and welcome God's own Son. He had to become less, see his own disciples leave him — and encourage them to — to follow him whose shoes John himself was not worthy to untie.

We're like John in also having to prepare a way for the Christ, first ^{of all} in our own hearts — let's ask John's help to make all our lives Christ's, with nothing of our own left. Let's listen, pay attention to that voice crying in the wilderness to us.