

December 15, 2002  
Fifth Sunday of Advent

#### Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

The Lord's assessment of John the Baptist as "more than a prophet" was no denial that John the Baptist was a prophet (Luke 7:26). Indeed, He said, "there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist" (7:28). A common persuasion on this point commenced early. John's own father "was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied" (1:67), with respect to his newborn son: "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest" (1:76). John's contemporaries, moreover, certainly regarded him as a prophet (20:6), as even Herod knew (Matthew 14:5).

Although our Lord said that "among those born of women there has not arisen one greater than John the Baptist" (Matthew 11:11), only Luke provides us with the name of the woman who gave John birth. In fact, Luke goes into some detail to tell of that lady named Elizabeth and the circumstances surrounding her unexpected conception of a son in her advanced years. The angel Gabriel, who had been somewhat quiet in Israel after the days of Daniel, appeared to Elizabeth's husband and predicted the pregnancy (Luke 1:13).

Moreover, God clearly intended to leave a special mark on John even before his birth. Six months into the gestation period, Elizabeth received another visitor, this one human, her young kinswoman from Galilee, named Mary. At Mary's greeting, John's mother sensed another Presence, as "the babe leaped in her womb" (1:41). Mary, in fact, like a new Ark of the Covenant, bore within her body God's newly incarnate Son, whose Father chose her greeting and that moment to sanctify the unborn John the Baptist. This event fulfilled an earlier prediction of Gabriel with respect to John: "He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb" (1:15). In drawing our attention to John's prophetic consecration before his birth, Luke portrays him in the likeness of the prophet Jeremiah, to whom God said, "Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you. Before you were born I sanctified you. I ordained you a prophet to the nations" (Jeremiah 1:5).

If John resembled Jeremiah, however, his resemblance to the prophet Elijah was even more pronounced. Once again, it was the angel Gabriel, who used of John the very words with which

the prophet Malachi foretold the return of Elijah: "And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Luke 1:16-17; Malachi 4:5-6).

Since Elijah's return had been predicted in the last of the Old Testament's prophetic books, there was considerable expectation on the matter, even among the Lord's apostles (Matthew 17:10). Although John himself denied that he really was Elijah in a literal sense (John 1:21), he surely felt some affinity to that earlier prophet; he even dressed like him (Matthew 3:4 [and 11:8]; 2 Kings 1:8).

Whatever John felt about the matter, nonetheless, Jesus Himself asserted that "Elijah has come already," and, when He asserted this, "the disciples understood that He spoke to them of John the Baptist" (Matthew 17:12-13). John's affinity to Elijah was more than haberdashery, however, for his appearance in this world introduced the days in which "the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force. For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. And if you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah who is to come" (11:12-14).

The "violence" associated with John was readily discerned in his asceticism, which prompted his enemies to say, "He has a demon" (11:18). Violence was also evident in his apocalyptic preaching, all about "the wrath to come," with axes laid to the roots of trees and the burning of chaff with unquenchable fire (3:7-12). John's hearers could never tell God that they had not been warned!

One of these was Herod Antipas, whom Herodias manipulated into beheading the violent John (Mark 6:14-29). Resenting the Baptist's condemnation of her "meaningful and fulfilling," albeit adulterous, relationship with Antipas, Herodias had longed for that day. Indeed, in the New Testament triangle of the feeble Antipas, his hateful consort Herodias, and the relentless prophet John, we have a remarkable parallel to the Old Testament triangle of the feeble Ahab, the hateful Jezebel and, of course, the unrelenting Elijah.

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