

3 Advent 2021

It is important to be able to relate to God in order to have a relationship with him/her.

John would not be welcome in most churches today. He wouldn't be affirming, sensitive or inclusive. He'd speak loudly and forcefully and tell his listeners to mend their ways. He might even be harsh, and question their integrity: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee the wrath to come?" He'd also offend people with old-fashioned words: "Lord," "Master," "Son of Man" and "Kingdom." And he'd embarrass everyone with his humility: he said he wasn't worthy to tie Christ's sandals. No wonder even his contemporaries thought he was possessed.

Today's churches are dying for lack of men like John. His message is short and unmistakable and simple: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." It is inconvenient and demanding. Most of us would rather forget it. But it holds the keys to a completely new life. That's why, when John first delivered it, crowds poured out of Jerusalem to hear him. They confessed their sins to him and begged for baptism. Even Jesus turned to him when he was baptized in the Jordan--he didn't seek the services of a scribe or Pharisee.

Matthew says that John came preaching "in the wilderness," a phrase that aptly describes the state of our culture today. Never in history has Christianity been so widespread. There are wealthy churches and poor ones, mega-churches and cell groups. Even airports and malls have places of worship. Everywhere you look, people are "preaching the Word." But how many are obeying it, and living as Christ tells us to live? That was John the Baptist's question, and the essence of his challenge: "Change, and bear fruits worthy of your repentance."

This call to repentance is the crux of Christianity. Some may argue that it is love, and it is true that Christ's first command is to "love God with all your heart, and love your neighbor as yourself." But if we are really faithful to that command, it will lead first of all to repentance--and then to the confession of sins, and to community. In other words, it will bring light into darkness. And this is urgent, because in spite of all our piety, there is still tremendous darkness.

Jesus did not tell his disciples to become Christians. He simply told them, "Leave your nets; come and follow me." Following Jesus means more than saying, "I accept Christ as my Lord and Savior," or "I've been saved." It means grappling with the fact that "if anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me," and that

"anyone who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple." This whole aspect of submission is completely missing in most of the Christian world.

As for being "saved," we need to rediscover what it really means, and stop making a mockery of Jesus' words: "Whoever tries to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the sake of the Gospel will find it."

Men like Martin Luther King and Dietrich Bonhoeffer did not just lead their followers or preach to them. They willingly gave their lives in order to remain true to their convictions. What might the world look like if there were more voices like theirs. And that brings us back to John the Baptist, who was beheaded by Herod because of his faithfulness.

The world is full of well-meaning people--people who really want to do something for God. But where are those who are willing to make such sacrifices for their faith? Where can one find a John the Baptist today? In the confused times we live in, we desperately need his audacity and courage.

-- by Johann Christoph Arnold

[Johann Christoph Arnold (www.ChristophArnold.com) is the author of ten books and pastor at the Woodcrest Bruderhof (www.woodcrestbruderhof.com).]

