

## “THE VOICE OF ONE CRYING . . .”<sup>1</sup>

### WITNESSES TO CHRIST, II ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST

**I**N that glorious masterpiece of the late Canon Sheehan, that surpassing tribute to the priestly and parochial life of Catholic Ireland which is entitled *My New Curate*, old Father Hanrahan, better known as “Daddy Dan” and the real hero of the story, was accustomed to celebrate yearly in his own quiet way the coming of the Child of Bethlehem into this afflicted world. “One of my oldest habits,” he writes, “has been to read up at Christmas time every scrap of literature that has any bearing whatever on the most touching and the most important event in all human history.” So his thoughts wander “back to ancient prophecies and forecastings, down to modern times—tales of travellers about Bethlehem, the sacrilegious possession of holy places by Moslems,” and, not least, to Virgil’s Fourth Eclogue, called Messianic, and to the “golden branch amid the shadows, kings and realms that pass to rise no more.”

Of his strictly devotional or scriptural reading we are given no details, but it would certainly have included the testimony of Isaias and Micheas, of Jeremias and Zacharias, of Daniel and the so-called “Psalms of Solomon,” and, above all, of the last and greatest figure in the whole order of “ancient prophecies and forecastings,” St. John the Baptist himself, our Lord’s immediate Forerunner who “came for witness, to witness concerning the light, that all might believe through him” (Jn. i, 6–7). The Greek words *martyria*, “witness,” and *martyrein*, “to bear witness” occur frequently in the Johannine writings, and comparatively seldom in the other New Testament books, and it has been well remarked that “to bear witness” was “the characteristic feature of the Baptist’s mission.” In the later verses of the Prologue to the Fourth Gospel we read: “John beareth witness to him, and crieth aloud, saying: This was he of whom I said: He that cometh after me, hath come to be before me, because he existed before me,” and in one of his speeches at Ephesus, St. Paul declares concerning the great Forerunner: “John baptized with a baptism of repentance, telling the people that they were to believe in him who was to come after him, *that is in Jesus*” (Acts xix, 4).

In the present much abbreviated study of St. John’s testimony to Christ we may well proceed in some sort of chronological order, mindful of the judge who said to the young barrister: “Mr. Jones, please arrange your facts in *some* order—alphabetical if you will, but chronological for preference.” Among the limited number of Gospel passages that concern St. John’s life and teaching, one has obviously pride of place in the order of time, if not in that of importance. It is the account

<sup>1</sup> All New Testament quotations are from the Westminster Version.

of the Visitation, given in St. Luke's Gospel, in the course of which we read : “ And it came to pass that when Elizabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the babe in her womb leapt, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she lifted up her voice with a loud cry and said : ‘ Blessed art thou among women, and blessed the fruit of thy womb.’ And whence this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come unto me ? For behold, when the sound of thy salutation fell on mine ears, the babe in my womb leapt with gladness ” (Lk. i, 41-43). It is of this testimony of St. John to Christ, while both the Forerunner and his Lord were still in the wombs of their mothers, that the hymn *Ut queant laxis* speaks :

“ Thou in thy mother's womb all darkly cradled,  
Knewest thy Monarch, biding in His chamber,  
Whence the two parents, through their children's merits,  
Mysteries uttered.”

Père Buzy in his *Life of St. John the Baptist* (Eng. Tr., p. 38) decides that St. Elizabeth's words may rightly be paraphrased : “ Thou, O Mary, art the Mother of my Lord, and I know this without any doubt from the emotion just experienced by the infant in my womb.” It is not astonishing, then, that Catholic writers have normally regarded St. John's trembling in the womb as no mere natural movement, but as the effect of a special grace, and that the great majority of patristic writers claim that he was, at that moment, sanctified and loosed from the bonds of original sin. It was, in addition, the “ first profession of faith of him who was to proclaim the Messiah throughout the desert of Judea ” (Buzy, loc. cit.).

The Gospel of the Infancy, as it is found in St. Luke, provides an account of St. John's birth, of the name given to him (*Yôhânan* in Hebrew, *Yûhannân* in Aramaic = “ Yahweh is gracious ”), and of his father's prophecy, commonly known as the *Benedictus*, in which the office and dignity of the Forerunner are proclaimed :

“ And thou, my child, thou shalt be called prophet of the Most High, for thou shalt go before the Lord to prepare his ways,  
To impart to his people knowledge of salvation  
through forgiveness of their sins ” (Lk. i, 76-7).

Then follows the sentence which is our only link between the babe of a day old and the grown man of more than thirty years. “ And the child grew and was strengthened in spirit ; and he was in the wilderness till the day of his manifestation before Israel.”

When next we meet with St. John he is at the beginning of his mission of repentance in the wilderness of Judea. St. Luke in his account is at pains to date the beginning of the ministry as exactly as possible, and, like the other Synoptists, he points to the *preparatory* character of St. John's preaching. To him are applied the words used by the prophet Isaias to proclaim the liberation of Israel by Cyrus :

“ Hark, one cries :

In the wilderness make clear the way of Yahweh,  
Make plain in the desert a highway for our God . . . ”

(Is. xl, 3 ; Kissane's tr.)

The baptism that John bestowed, the essential rite and symbol of the conversion he preached, was, unlike the Jewish ceremonial washings, not concerned with bodily or legal impurity, but was a baptism of repentance, of spiritual and moral renewal, of remission of sins. It lacked the power inherent in Christian baptism of producing directly and immediately the remission of sins, but, indirectly and mediately, it stirred up in the souls of its recipients sentiments of contrition and faith, and these, aided by grace, obtained forgiveness. Cfr. H. Houbaut in *Dict. de théol. Cath.*, t. viii, *Jean Baptiste (Baptême de Saint)*.

The imperfect nature of the rite as compared with Christian baptism is clearly emphasized by St. John himself in the incident recorded by the Fourth Evangelist regarding the mission of the priests and levites from Jerusalem who were sent to question John. To their enquiry :  
\* “ Why then dost thou baptize if thou art not the Christ, nor Elias, nor the Prophet ? ” St. John answers that he baptizes, it is true, but in water alone ; and in a cognate passage in the Synoptists (Mt. iii, 11 ; Mk. i, 8 ; Lk. iii, 16) he adds : “ He [the expected Messiah] shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire ” (Lk. iii, 16, cfr. also Jn. i, 33). He declares openly and without reserve that he is not the coming Messiah, that he is, indeed, “ scarcely more than a voice, a voice without a name, a breath that stirred the air and then was spent, which bade men make straight the paths for the Lord who was to come ” (Buzy, pp. 102-3).

In the concluding verses of the Synoptists' account of St. John's mission (Mt. iii, 12 ; Lk. iii, 17) the Messiah is revealed not merely as *Baptizer*, but as *Judge*. “ His winnowing-fan is in his hand, and he will cleanse out the threshing-floor ; he will gather his wheat into the barn, but will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire ” (Mt. iii, 12). This picturesque imagery will be familiar to all who have seen a Palestinian threshing-floor of the ancient, century-old type, and the winnowing performed with the “ fan ” or pronged fork, by which the threshed grain is shaken to and fro in the breeze that blows from the Mediterranean in the early morning or at sundown. The allegory is not a difficult one. The threshing-floor is the world ; the winnower is the Messiah ; the grain stands for the just and the straw or chaff for sinners ; the granary is heaven, and the “ unquenchable fire ” is that of hell. So St. John testifies that the Messiah, the *source of life and holiness*, is also *the supreme Judge*.

With this allegory of the final harvesting the Synoptists' account of St. John's messianic preaching comes to an end. But there is a further passage in St. John's Gospel that provides a problem of extraordinary interest in regard to one of our Lord's best known titles, that of the *Lamb of God*.

“The next day he beholdeth Jesus coming to him, and saith: ‘Behold the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sin of the world. This is he of whom I said: After me there cometh a man who hath come to be above me, because he existed before me. And I knew him not, but that he might be manifested to Israel for this cause I came baptizing with water.’” (Jn. i, 29-31).

“The next day” is, evidently, the day after the departure of the embassy of priests and levites from Jerusalem. Our Lord had already been baptized by St. John (Jn. i, 32-3), and the days of His fast and temptation in the wilderness were already past. He approaches St. John and the group of neophytes, and St. John points to him with the words: “Behold the *Lamb of God*, who taketh away the sin of the world!” The title has been variously held to bear reference to the paschal lamb or to the lamb of the temple sacrifices or to the Suffering Servant of Yahweh in Isaias’s “Servant Songs,” represented “as a sheep borne along to the slaughter, and as a ewe before her shearers . . .” (Is. liii, 7), upon whom were laid the sicknesses and the iniquities of mankind (vv. 4 and 11). Yet there are difficulties in all these views. Neither the paschal nor the sacrificial lamb was ordinarily associated with the remission of sin, and the idea of a suffering Messiah was foreign to the prevailing Messianic expectation of St. John’s time. Hence, certain authors have been led to accept the solution adopted by St. Augustine and St. Jerome, and within recent years by Père M.-J. Lagrange, O.P. which sees in the title “Lamb of God” a reference primarily to the spotless purity of Jesus our Lord. I have given reasons for dissenting from this view in the English adaptation of Buzy’s *Life*, and in the latest (1946) edition of his *Evangile selon S. Jean* (*La Sainte Bible*, t. viii, p. 323), my old friend and class fellow, Père François Braun, O.P., has reinforced the contrary arguments. To appreciate the position fully we must read the Fourth Gospel’s account of St. John the Baptist’s recollections of our Lord’s baptism at his hands.

“And John bare witness, saying: ‘I have seen the Spirit coming down as a dove from heaven, and it abode upon him. I knew him not, but he who sent me to baptize with water, he said to me: He upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending and abiding upon him, he it is that baptizeth with the Holy Spirit. And I have seen, and I have borne witness that this is the Son of God’” (Jn. i, 32-4).

Père Braun’s comment on these verses may be rendered as follows:—

“We believe that in the group of verses 29-34 the evangelist wished to indicate precisely the development that took place in the Baptist’s thought as a result of the vision [granted] at the baptism. Previously (that is at the moment at which the Synoptists leave off), St. John still pictured to himself the Messiah according to the ideas prevalent among the Jews of his time. The appearance of the Spirit hovering above Jesus made him understand that He was to realize the vocation of Isaias’

'*Ebed Yahweh*, the servant of God who was immolated for the sins of His people. Hence the figure of the Lamb of God (an expression corresponding to the '*Ebed Yahweh*'), which was suggested by the use of a lamb as a type of sacrificial victim. As with so many other points of divine revelation John's testimony was only fully understood by the Apostles in the light of the Resurrection."

So St. John bears testimony to the Messiah's offices as sanctifier, as judge, and as the Lamb free from stain, the expiatory victim for the sins of the world. Two other titles may be said to complete the essential witness. First, that of *pre-existent being*, which is implicit in the Baptist's words: "After me there cometh a man who hath come to be above me, because he existed before me." The translation here provided is the only one that is acceptable. St. John is emphasizing not Christ's priority in dignity, but His priority of time or of nature (else he would have used the present tense: "because he *is* before me.") The unexpected use of the imperfect supposes the Messiah to have been pre-existent. How, on any other view, could He have preceded His Forerunner, who was His senior by six months? The context, as well as the words used, can only suggest that Jesus was a *pre-existent being*, that He was already in existence before He appeared in time.

Lastly, there is the title used in verse 34, that of *Son of God*. On this it may be sufficient to quote the late Dr. Alfred Plummer in his *St. John* ("Cambridge Greek Testament . . ."): "The Incarnate Logos, the Messiah. These words of the Baptist confirm the account of the voice from heaven. The whole passage shows that St. John does not, as Philo does, identify the Logos with the Spirit."

We may here pass over the account of our Lord's baptism by St. John, with the exception of two sentences, recorded by St. Matthew (iii, 13-14):

"Then cometh Jesus from Galilee to the Jordan unto John to be baptized by him. And John was for hindering him, and said: 'It is I who need to be baptized by thee, and cometh thou to me?'"

The words may be associated with those uttered towards the close of the Baptist's ministry, in answer to the complaints of his disciples: "Rabbi, he who was with thee beyond the Jordan [i.e. at Bethania], to whom thou hast borne witness, behold he baptizeth, and all are coming to him" (Jn. iii, 26). In answer to them St. John makes use of the allegory of the bridegroom and his *paranymphos* or groomsman, whose duty it is to have all things ready for his friend, and then to efface himself, in order that all eyes may be fixed upon the groom. On the morning of the wedding he retires, so far as his office of groomsman is concerned, into complete obscurity, whereas the bridegroom continues to enjoy all his prerogatives and his full title. St. John ends with the phrase: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (Jn. iii, 29). On this Père Lagrange has observed: "It has often been remarked that the

feast of St. John almost corresponds with the summer solstice, and Christmas with the winter solstice; but it does not seem that such symbolism influenced the choice of days for these feasts" (*S. Jean*, in loc.).

So St. John's public ministry and his witness to Christ end on a note of dignity, of joy, and of complete self-abasement. "Ye bear me witness yourselves," he reminds his disciples, "that I said: 'I am not the Christ, but am sent before him'" (Jn. iii, 27).

The events connected with St. John's arrest and imprisonment, his sending of his disciples to Christ, and our Lord's testimony to his great Herald cannot detain us at this point, though we may remark in passing that the mysterious words: "Yet the least in the Kingdom of God is greater than he" (Lk. vii, 28) in no way detract from the uniqueness of John's witness, but bring out, even more fully than before, John's role as the last and most transcendent of the Old Testament prophets. "A prophet? Yea, I say to you, and more than a prophet. . . ." (Lk. vii, 26). The closing scene in St. John's career sets the final seal upon his witness, by way of the testimony of blood. He was not merely a prophet, not merely a messenger of the Most High, but a martyr, the acts of whose martyrdom may be clearly read in the narratives of St. Matthew (xiv, 3-12) and St. Mark (vi, 17-29).

"So died the Forerunner of our Lord in an obscure dungeon for the cause of eternal morality, and, one may add, for the sake of the moral teaching of the Gospel of Christ. He brought to an end his noble mission as a preacher by the most eloquent of all sermons, the cheerful acceptance of a martyr's death" (Buzy, E.T., p. 222).

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## GALLIO THE PROCONSUL OF ACHAIA

(ACTS xviii, 12-17)

THE references to Gallio outside of the New Testament would leave him a shadowy figure if we had nothing else. But in fact his family as a whole is as well known to us as any Roman family in that century. Placed in that setting he becomes a more life-like character. We possess considerable works written by his father, brother, and nephew, and this brother (the younger Seneca) played a momentous part in Roman history.

Gallio acquired that name by adoption. He started life as Annaeus Novatus. His home was Cordova, at that time the most cultured city in Spain and already a great centre of Roman civilization. His father, Lucius Annaeus Seneca, was a very successful and wealthy professor of