

Commentary on the Gospel for Sat, Jan 12th 2013

The disciples of Jesus baptize in a few places in the Gospels, and Jesus emphatically sends them forth to baptize at the end of Matthew, but here in John 3 is the only place where we come even close to seeing Jesus Himself doing the baptizing. Even then the evangelist seems to alter what he says about Jesus' baptizing a few verses later, in 4:1.

Today's gospel passage is thus primarily to establish a parallel between the Baptist and Jesus. Once the evangelist sets up the situation a question arises about "purification," which says something about what the Baptist is actually doing as he works, and then the passage moves on to the critical comparison of the roles of the two men as the Baptist himself sees it.

Scripture scholars will point to the fact that the whole passage is an invitation to the Baptist's followers to transfer their loyalty to Jesus and to accept Him as the one whom John was announcing. That is not, however, how the passage calls to us today, in our time and our situations.

I think that we should look more at the fact that John sees himself as "decreasing," and I believe that although he realizes that the end is near for him he still speaks more than a little about the joy he finds in this diminishment. He does not merely accept his role and his martyrdom, he underlines the joy of his mission's accomplishment, the coming of the Christ into the world.

As humans we ourselves are facing death and, before that, at least some form of diminishment in our own lives. Can we ourselves do it with the joy and generosity and courage that John shows?

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