

This Gospel always puzzles me. I don't understand why John the Baptist doesn't seem to know who Jesus was. After all, John and Jesus were cousins and their mothers were close relatives.

We know from the story of the Visitation, that John leapt in Elizabeth's womb when Mary, pregnant with Jesus, came into their presence. That seems to imply at least some spiritual knowledge of Jesus' identity.

At John's birth, Zechariah, his father, after being mute for nine months, proclaims who both Jesus and John were. Of Jesus he said: "*Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel... He has raised up for us a mighty savior, born of the house of his servant David.*" (Lk 1:68-69) This is a description of the Messiah who was to be a descendant of King David. Of John he said: "*You my child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way.*" (Lk 1:76) This is a description of the prophesied precursor to the Messiah. Zechariah speaks of the roles these two boys will play in God's plan of salvation. One could reasonably presume that John, when he was older, would have heard of these extraordinary statements made by his father, which are preserved in Scripture as the Canticle of Zechariah.

We read about an encounter between Jesus and John in the Gospel of Matthew when they were adults. At that time many people thought John might be the Messiah, but he denied it saying one mightier than he was coming after him. When Jesus arrived in Galilee he went to see John at the Jordan to be baptized. John

reluctantly baptized Jesus saying “*I need to be baptized by you, and yet you are coming to me?*”^(Mt 3:14) And after baptizing Jesus he saw the Spirit of God descending on Jesus like a dove and heard a voice from heaven saying, “*This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.*”^(Mt 3:17) It’s hard to believe that John would not have made the connection between the prophecies and this experience.

All these events make me think that John knew Jesus pretty well. So why did John ask, “*Are you the one who is to come?*”

Most people assume that John was asking if Jesus was the Messiah, the new king in David’s line, the king who would free Israel from the oppression of their enemies. But it is my opinion, based on what we read in Scripture about the encounters between Jesus and John, that John already had a pretty good idea that Jesus was the Messiah. But Jesus wasn’t acting quite like the Messiah Israel expected. John, seeking to understand, asks Jesus about his identity. But John did not ask the obvious question “*Are you the Messiah?*” he asked instead “*Are you the one who is to come?*” Why ask the question about Jesus’ identity in that way? Did John suspect that Jesus was more than just a new king that would lead Israel back to its former glory?

My favorite biblical scholar, Dr. Brant Pitre, always says, if you don’t understand something in the New Testament look to the Old Testament for the explanation.

When we look in the Old Testament we discover that John the Baptist’s question is an allusion to a prophecy found in the book

of Isaiah. The Church has very kindly given us that very prophecy in the first reading for today. Isaiah 35 is the prophecy about this “*one who is to come*” and what he will do when he does. And if you look carefully, that prophecy is not about the coming of the Messiah it is about the coming of God. John’s question to Jesus is asking if he is the one who will fulfill Isaiah’s prophecy.

Also in today’s Gospel Jesus says of John, “*This is the one about whom it is written: Behold, I am sending my messenger ahead of you; he will prepare your way before you.*” This too is a reference to an Old Testament passage from the prophet Malachi, “*Lo, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me*”. (Mal 3:1) And if you read the book of Malachi you will discover the prophet is not talking about the Messiah at all, but he is talking about the coming of God.

So we return to John’s question, “*Are you the one who is to come?*” In this question, inspired by Isaiah’s prophecy, John is not simply asking if Jesus is the Messiah, he is asking if Jesus is the fulfillment of the prophecy, he is asking if Jesus is God. And Jesus responds by describing the works he has been performing, those very things the prophet Isaiah says that the one who is to come would do, “*Then will the eyes of the blind be opened, the ears of the deaf be cleared; then will the lame leap like a stag, then the tongue of the mute will sing.*” (Is 35: 5-6a) Jesus’ answer tells John that he is indeed fulfilling Isaiah’s prophecy, that he is not only the Messiah but he is God.

This entire interchange between John and Jesus becomes

one of the first revelations of the divinity of Jesus. It's no wonder Jesus' seems evasive in his answers to John's question, not simply saying yes I am, for it is his claim to be divine that ultimately gets Jesus executed on the cross. That is also why he says "*blessed is the one who takes no offense at me.*" It is those who do take offense at Jesus' claims who will plot to kill him.

And when we look at the Responsorial Psalm for today we see that it supports these assertions when it presents a similar description of what God will do when he comes: "*The LORD God secures justice for the oppressed, gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets captives free. The LORD gives sight to the blind; the LORD raises up those who were bowed down. The LORD loves the just; the LORD protects strangers. The fatherless and the widow he sustains, but the way of the wicked he thwarts. The LORD shall reign forever*"(Ps 146: 6-10) One important detail to note here, when you see the word LORD in all caps, as it is in this Psalm, it refers specifically to Yahweh, the God of Israel.

On this Gaudete Sunday our Church wants us to understand what we are anticipating as we approach Christmas. It's more than the birth of the baby Jesus, more than the coming of the Messiah. It is the most glorious event in human history since creation itself, God coming among us as one of us, bringing us salvation. May we rejoice with joy as John surely did when he learned that God had indeed come in the person of the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

May this Advent season bring us to a deeper understanding of who Jesus Christ truly is.