

2 Epiphany – Year A – January 19, 2011 - Homily
Isaiah 49:1-7; Psalm 40: 1-12; 1 Corinthians 1:1-9; John 1:29-42
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You know that sinking feeling you get when there's something wrong with your car, and you can tell that it isn't going to be a quick or easy fix. The burden of that feeling comes from at least three directions. In no particular order, the first is that the car has got to go into the shop, which for most of us, is highly inconvenient. The second is that we're already counting the cost to our bank balance, and wincing. And the third is that the whole mess is out of our control, and whatever the mechanic says, we probably have to take their word for it. Now have you ever had that feeling of blessed relief when the mechanic comes out and says that the problem is not as bad as you thought, or that the part that needs to be replaced is still under warranty? I'll testify to that one! Yes, it's perhaps a rare occurrence, but a real gift when it happens!

When I read tonight's Gospel reading this week, what really struck me was a huge sense of relief, or perhaps release would be a better word. A kind of empathetic relief for how I imagine John the Baptist must have felt to see the living, breathing evidence that his prophetic words are true, and a sense of great joy and release that Jesus is here for me, for you, for all of us. John has spent his whole life preparing the way for the coming of the Messiah. He has most recently become the spectacle at the River Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, helping the people to get right with God, so that they would recognize and welcome God's Son. Finally, John baptizes Jesus, and according to the promise of God, he sees the Spirit descending on this strangely charismatic man, and knows that this is the anointed Messiah of God. The next day John testifies and points to Jesus as the Son of God, made flesh and blood for the life of the world. Then again, when he sees Jesus the following day, John points his own disciples towards Jesus, telling them that He is the long-awaited and promised Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. John's life has been tremendously disciplined, and hard. There is historical evidence to suggest that John spent a lot of his time living in the desert caves with a group called the Essenes. They lived an ascetic life, which is probably why John is described as wearing camel's hair and eating sparingly from what the desert provided. John's mission has always been clear to him, and what a marvelous gift of God that he saw his work through to its proper completion as Jesus begins His own ministry.

There is no sense of rivalry or inappropriate pride in John, just joy in the fulfillment of his own mission, and joy that he is able to point to Jesus as the One who baptizes with the Holy Spirit, and the One who ranks ahead of himself. Later in the Gospel of John, John the Baptist is quoted as saying of Jesus, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). For you and me, it's important that we really embrace the kind of relief or release that John the Baptist experienced. The first thing we have to understand is that this is not the kind of relief that we might experience when someone else, for example, says that they'll take care of it, whatever burden "it" happens to be. That's the kind of relief we get from escaping or avoiding a task that is laid before us. For John, the temptation could perhaps have been to feel great relief that all the people who had taken to following him, and had become his disciples, can now be handed over to Jesus' care. Caring for others is a big responsibility, and no doubt caused John the Baptist a hefty slice of stress. That would have been the "Phew, narrow miss" kind of relief, which is not what we mean in John's case. John willingly embraces his prophetic call, and all the responsibilities that it entails. Yet he never becomes prideful about having a whole group of people hanging on his every word, and following

him around, calling themselves his disciples. John is so grounded in faith that he seems to understand his role and relationship to Jesus completely. With great humility he gladly points to the Living Word, just as he pointed towards God and the gift of repentance that would prepare all hearts to receive Jesus.

Let's hold on to that sense of God's constant presence, and support for each of our vocations and ministries in His name, as we consider a poem by Saint Teresa of Avila, a sixteenth century nun. She wrote, "Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which to look out Christ's compassion to the world. Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good. Yours are the hands with which he is to bless [humankind] now." As the season of Epiphany unfolds like the first blooming flowers of spring, we follow Jesus as He is anointed as God's Son at baptism, as He reveals His earliest signs and as the mystery of His mission in and to the world gently unfurls. Jesus is the living embodiment of God's love. Saint Teresa is pointing out to all followers of Christ that we too should embody Christ's love while we are in this world, remembering that there is only one Messiah.

At some point in all of our lives, somehow we too accepted the invitation, as if from Christ's own lips, to "Come and see", to dwell with the Body of Christ, and to listen and to follow Him. Yet, we are fully human, and full of the kind of human fallibility that trips us up as we try to be faithful. As I was recently reminded, for many of our friends and family, and especially for our neighbors, we are the only living Gospel they will ever see or hear. That's quite a weight of responsibility, if we are trying to live faithfully and with integrity. A great gift of tonight's Gospel message is the reminder that we are not alone in fulfilling or continuing Christ's mission. After hearing John's testimony, Andrew and his friend come to Jesus. Andrew then introduces his brother Simon to Jesus. We do not come to Jesus alone. We stand amidst a host of saints and witnesses. We are always gathered into community, and supported by the indwelling Holy Spirit. Our own transformation in Christ's name empowers us with a Christ-like willingness to offer ourselves to God in humble service. It changes our hearts to see others with Christ-like love and compassion. To our relief, in the release of accepting the gift of faith, which is our freedom in Christ, we can rejoice that Jesus is our savior and the savior of the world.

We join our lives of faith, we offer our own voices to the testimony of John, pointing in word and deed to Jesus, who also says, "For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:30). This is the lightness of our own being as disciples of Jesus. It is the sure and certain knowledge that we are the signposts planted all over this earth pointing to God in Christ, and that we are not the destination. Our relief, our joy, and our greatest satisfaction and release is to discern and fulfill our own vocations and ministries, knowing that we are empowered with God's strength, and equipped with God's gifts, and especially with the Word, who is also the Light and Life of all people. May the Lord guide our hands and feet in His service, give us the words of Truth to share, give us eyes to see God's great goodness, and hearts brimming over with love and compassion. In our own transformation and journey of faith, may the Lord bless us with the humility of John the Baptist to pray always, "He must increase, and I must decrease".

Amen.