

Meditations: 23

December

Some reflections that can assist our prayer as we await the Child Jesus' arrival at Christmas.

- John's mission
- Hiding and disappearing
- God's silent way of working

WHAT, THEN, WILL THIS CHILD BE? (Lk 1:66). In their little village, the friends of Zechariah and Elizabeth are in awe. Wonderful things are happening around the birth of John. The anticipation is growing at every moment. His father has just regained

his speech and all his words are words of praise blessing God. Zechariah cannot hide his joy and gratitude. Those around him sense the divine work in all these events, so they don't want to miss anything. They record all the words in the depths of their souls.

In that village *her neighbours heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to Elizabeth (Lk 1:58)*. This Christmas, now at our doorstep, we too want to hear once again about God's mercies: how good He is, how much He loves us and how He wants to save us and free us from sin. We can ask Mary's relatives to help us to sharpen our ears, to prepare ourselves as best we can to welcome the wonderful gift of redemption. In the Christmas atmosphere of these days, we do not want to fail to listen to the gentle voice of Jesus. "Let us be silent and let the Child speak. Let us take his words to heart in rapt contemplation

of his face. If we take him in our arms and let ourselves be embraced by him, he will bring us unending peace of heart.”^[1]

In today's Gospel we see that the Precursor has just been born. He is not the Messiah and he knows it. Some people will expressly ask him this question. And we know that he always answers in the same way: *He must increase, but I must decrease* (Jn 3:30). Sometimes it isn't easy for us to let our Lord work. It isn't easy to learn to get out of the way. We have certainly been involved in his apostolic mission and perhaps we have prayed a lot for a particular person. However a true apostle knows how to stay in the background. We know we aren't indispensable and don't want to be the main protagonist. We are striving to bring Christ's message, and not our own, to souls. We can ask Saint John the Baptist to help us to be, as

he was, good “precursors” for the coming of Jesus into the lives of so many people around us.

ENJOYING SOMETHING means appreciating the fruit it produces. An apostle always sees fruit. For we know that nothing we do in union with Christ falls on deaf ears. We always enjoy carrying out the apostolic mission, even if we fail to see results. The way in which God has brought about the redemption is mysterious. His Son’s birth, which we will soon celebrate, takes place without almost anyone knowing about it. John is a good Precursor because like Jesus he is discreet, simple, unassuming. As Saint Augustine said: “He saw where salvation was; he realized he was only a torch and feared being extinguished by the wind of pride.”^[2] —

Hiding and disappearing fills an apostle’s soul with peace, because

those who live like this know they are an instrument. They are aware that they don't carry the whole burden on their own shoulders. When things go well, they realize that God is the one who has done it. And when they don't go well, they don't worry because they know that God will put things right. And this doesn't detract from their eagerness or spontaneity. On the contrary, it takes away tension, anxiety, rigidity. When we think something is slipping through our fingers, we can tell our Lord that we trust in Him, that we aren't seeking anything for ourselves, but that we want to be the channel through which He brings his happiness to those around us.

Many saints have felt spurred to live with this humility. They want to imitate Jesus and, like Him, seek only God's glory. It might seem that to disappear is to withdraw, to abandon the mission, but this is not the case.

We see it clearly in the life of John the Baptist and in all the saints: their humility led them to never neglect the souls around them. Saint Josemaría said: “Ever since I became determined to listen to God’s voice, after sensing Jesus’ love, I have felt in my soul an eagerness to hide myself and disappear; to live those words *illum oportet crescere, me autem minui* (Jn 3:30) – that the glory of the Lord should increase, and I should not be seen.”^[3] At other times he said it more succinctly: “My way is to hide and disappear, so that Jesus alone may shine out”^[4]

JOHN ALSO WENT AHEAD of Christ when the time came for him to lay down his life. It must have been a great joy for him to see how his disciples found the Messiah, and how they stayed with him. When he was arrested and about to be executed, he didn’t know that the Messiah himself would soon follow in his footsteps.

The Baptist is the greatest of those born of women (cf. *Mt* 11:11), and yet he lived trying to remain hidden. The name John means “favoured by God.” God makes the one who hides himself happy, gives him peace, enables him to enjoy life. Their burden becomes light and bearable.

God’s plan is carried out in this way, silently and unnoticed by many. Christ has already decided how he wants to reign: from the Cross, from the suffering that bearing the sins of all mankind entails. “God’s stooping down became real in a way previously inconceivable. The Creator who holds all things in his hands, on whom we all depend, makes himself small and in need of human love. God is in the stable. How, indeed, could his love for humanity, his solicitude for us, have appeared greater and more pure? The cloud of hiddenness, the cloud of the poverty of a Child totally in need

of love, is at the same time the cloud of glory. For nothing can be more sublime, nothing greater than the love which thus stoops down, descends, becomes dependent.”^[5] —

We ask Our Lady, the humble woman of Nazareth who wanted Jesus to always be the protagonist, to help us to be effective and discreet instruments in the hands of the best Craftsman in history.

^[1] — Pope Francis, Homily, 24 December 2015

^[2] — Saint Augustine, *Sermon* 293.

^[3] — Saint Josemaría, *Letter*, 29 December 1947/14 February 1966, 16.

^[4] — Saint Josemaría, *Letter*, 28 January 1975.

^[5] — Pope Benedict XVI, Homily, 24 December 2008.

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