

Advent Message

“John the Baptist and the Black Prince: When No Help Comes”



“The Black Prince at Crécy” by Julian Russell Story (1888)

(Correction – In my last “Matt’s Message”, I described Stoicism as a Roman idea, but in fact, the Greeks started it long before Rome. This just goes to prove my point about Rome not being great at creative thinking.)

The “Hundred Years’ War” was fought between France and England in the late Middle Ages. In the early years of the war, England’s King Edward the Third and his son, the Prince of Wales (usually called “The Black Prince”), won a number of spectacular victories in France. After these battles, England controlled huge parts of France. England held this territory for decades until finally a strange, mystical teenage girl named Joan of Arc was able to inspire the French to begin to win their country back.

Among the early English victories was the great battle of Crécy, in the north of France. Edward III and the Black Prince were both at this battle and the hardest fighting fell to the Prince and the knights who were around him. Now, King Edward was no stranger to brutal fighting; he loved being close to the action. But in this battle, he was off in a safe place, observing the ebb and flow of the struggle and giving orders from a high hill.

The Prince and his men were fighting well, but the French were outnumbering them. Eventually, as it got worse and worse, the English knights decided to send a messenger to the King to ask for the King's personal forces to ride to their rescue. The messenger rode up to the King, dismounted, bowed deeply, and said, "If the attack grows any heavier, it may be more than your son can handle."

Everyone expected the king to jump into action immediately, but he thought for a minute before answering. Then he said, "Is my son wounded?"

"No, thank God," said the messenger, who was trying not to get a little impatient, "But he is very hard pressed and needs your help badly."

King Edward looked at the messenger and said, "Go back and tell them not to send for me again today, as long as my son is alive. Give them my command to let the boy win his spurs, for if God has so ordained it, I wish the day to be his and the honour to go to him."

Now, I am in no way advocating this method of parenting. Personally, I would be riding towards the Black Prince before the messenger was done giving his message. But that's just me. Anyways, this is not an article for Today's Parent. I'm using this story as a way to understand the man who steps on to centre stage for two Sundays in Advent: John the Baptist.

Of all the mysteries surrounding this mysterious man of the desert, we see the strangest mystery in the Gospel reading for the third Sunday of Advent. In this reading, John appears to lose his faith in Jesus. While John is in prison, he sends some messengers to Jesus to ask him the startling question: "'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?'"

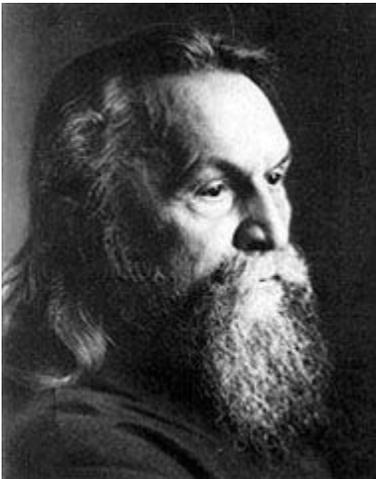
Did you hear that? If this doesn't shock and disturb you, then you're not reading the story closely. Remember: before anyone believed in Jesus, John believed. Before Jesus had any followers, John bowed before him. Before anyone knew who Jesus was, John said, "Behold, the Lamb of God!" Before there were any Christians, there was John the Baptist, a solitary voice in the desert crying out: SOMETHING BIG IS ABOUT TO HAPPEN! He started everything. It's very hard to see how Jesus's ministry could have started without John. John was the first witness. People came out into the wilderness to follow John. John pointed them away from himself towards the young man from Nazareth.

Because of John, Jesus was not completely alone in the world. Someone understood him. John was a man with a huge amount of credibility who could introduce Jesus to the world. John is the hinge connecting the Old and New Testaments. John is admired so much by the Orthodox Church, that their artists often depict him with wings! They see him as more of an angel than a human. And they're not very far from the truth. He stood alone in the human race in seeing and meeting God, the word made flesh. Without him...well...it's impossible to imagine things without him.

And yet here we are, in Matthew chapter 11, and this angelic human has suddenly forgotten everything. Here he is asking, "Um, it is you? After all? Or is there someone else?"

This is one of those places in the Bible where people usually choose not to think seriously about what's happening because it's not easy to understand. People say, "Well, John wasn't really doubting Jesus, he was just asking a rhetorical question, giving Jesus a chance to affirm himself." But it's okay to allow the Bible to confuse us sometimes. We don't have to just rush to the easy answers. Especially when dealing with young people, we can't just parrot the old simple, water-tight responses. If we just repeat what we were taught, without thinking about it, this often just shuts down any further questioning or interest.

So why does this almost angelic human seem to lose faith in the one he introduced to the world? Well, luckily for us, there's a Russian Orthodox theologian who offers a courageous and creative answer to this difficult question.



Sergius Bulgakov (1871-1944) was a priest who was exiled from Communist Russia in 1922 – at the age of 51 – for being a prominent Christian intellectual. He spent the

remainder of his life in Paris, teaching and writing at a seminary that he helped establish. Bulgakov (emphasis on the second syllable) was a creative thinker who was always pushing the envelope. The Orthodox Church doesn't support some of his ideas, but for the most part he is seen as one of the most important and influential Christian thinkers of the 20th Century. As the years pass, more and more theologians are studying and analyzing his ideas. This might be the first you've heard of him, but in 100 years, he'll probably be very well known. While in Paris, Bulgakov wrote "The Friend of the Bridegroom", which is a full book-long study of John the Baptist. He devotes an entire long chapter to these few verses, where John asks Jesus if he is indeed the one.

So, remember: the question is, "*Why did John the Baptist – the first believer in Jesus – suddenly doubt who Jesus was?*" Bulgakov answers the question in an unexpected, but brilliant way.

Surprisingly Bulgakov turns us away from John to remind us of an episode in Jesus's life. The night before Jesus's crucifixion, he was praying alone in the garden of Gethsemane. Jesus asked God if there was any other way that his mission could be accomplished, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want, but what you want" (Matthew Chapter 26, verse 39).

When you think about it, this is another shocking moment, similar to the disbelief John showed when he asked Jesus if they should expect someone else. This is the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, the eternal Word of God, through whom all things were made. And yet here he is apparently backing down now that his final battle approaches? John the Baptist began questioning everything when he was in prison. Now Jesus is asking to be let off more easily, now that his arrest and captivity is drawing near. Christ is trembling in fear, all alone at night, as his enemies are coming close. He affirms his faith and obedience, but only after asking for another way out.

I think Christians would perhaps rather not think too deeply about these two events. Why do they bother us? Because they bring us face to face with the *humanity* of the greatest human: John. And they even bring us face to face with the humanity of the God/human: Jesus Christ. And maybe these episodes even bring us face to face with our own humanity: those moments of fear and doubt when we are *only human* and any divine help or inspiration is gone.

Bulgakov says that God does indeed abandon us sometimes. Through most of our lives, God is right there with us. Whether we notice it or not, we are guided, supported, inspired, and enlightened by the Holy Spirit. But sometimes we are not. Sometimes it feels like the ground disappears beneath us. Sometimes it feels like we suddenly don't know ourselves. Sometimes all certainty seems to vanish like smoke. These are simple facts of being human. John was only human. And amazingly even the Son of God was human.

Bulgakov says that there are times for all of us when God lets us walk alone through the darkness. He takes his hand out of our hand and we walk on our own, unable to see, lost in the valley of the shadow. I've been there. You've possibly been there too. This has been called "The Dark Night of the Soul." All support and comfort is taken away. We find no help in our faith. God himself seems absent.

Now, we shouldn't take this too far; God is omnipresent (he's everywhere) and omnipotent (he's all-powerful). He can't *not* be somewhere. He can't be *uninvolved* in any space or time. So God is never completely absent from us. BUT... I think Bulgakov is right to say that there are times when God's support and inspiration is withdrawn from us. We see this clearly in the Old Testament book of Job. All of Job's blessings are taken away and God actually allows Satan to afflict Job, almost (but not quite!) to the point of death. Job sits on a pile of ashes and rages against God's apparent injustice for many interesting chapters.

We thought the great John the Baptist would be spared moments like this. Maybe John thought so too. But Bulgakov suggests that, when John decided to send messengers from his prison cell to ask Jesus who he really was, John was experiencing his own Garden of Gethsemane. All throughout John's life, the Holy Spirit had been radically present and active – even starting when John leapt in his mother's womb, sensing that Jesus' mother Mary was near. No human lived in God's power and presence like John. But there came a time when that power and presence were withdrawn. When he was in prison, not long before his decapitation, John felt weak and confused and anxious. Just imagine what it was like for John, alone in that prison cell, suddenly wondering if he'd been wrong about everything!

But here is the final take-away from this reflection. When God leaves us alone in the dark, he is not toying with us. He's not like a cat playing with a half-dead mouse. He's not punishing us or teaching us a lesson. What he *is* doing is this: *he is giving us the opportunity*

to become our true selves through struggle and crisis. Bulgakov says, “Whether in life or death, man must approach the Garden of Gethsemane, and gain in it his own self.” We become transformed into the full person we are meant to be only through weakness and struggle and crisis. Christ’s victory (which is our victory) could not be given to him. He had to fight for it and bring it out of real darkness and despair. John’s life could not be a simple unbroken progression of wisdom and inspiration and strength. He had to experience true struggle and real weakness so that his witness was meaningful. God took his Spirit away from John so that John had to fall back on the very *human* actions of doubting, seeking proof, and searching for comfort. Alone in his prison cell, John the Baptist found Jesus in a much deeper way than when he was preaching to the crowds that were gathering around him. Now it was the result of struggle and solitude.

Perhaps you could say that there are two ways for humans to succeed: 1) God can help us. Or 2) we can act under our own powers – which God gave us. Either way, the success originates with God, but option number 2 involves more human participation and struggle and transformation. I guess usually it’s a spectrum: sometimes God gives us 100% power, sometimes he gives us 50%, sometimes he gives us 0% power. When we are at 0% power, things get interesting. And painful. We have to dig deep into parts of ourselves we never knew existed. We have to learn new tricks. We have to think about things in new ways. We have to come face to face with who we are as humans, getting to know our weakness and fear, maybe even confronting death itself. But it can be at these dark, confusing moments, in the middle of a long adventure, when we’re not sure if we’re on the right road, this is when we meet ourselves. All the walls we’ve built come down. All our delusions of grandeur disappear. We see ourselves for the first time and realize that we’re not the person we thought we were. The creator of the universe is showing us ourselves.

However, the fact is, sometimes we fail in these moments. We may turn to evil. We may become violent towards ourselves or others or the world. It is a condition of being human that we do have the freedom to choose self-destructive habits and to hurt others and the world around us. I’ve heard people say it would be better if we didn’t have the freedom to choose evil. I admit, I like thinking of a world in which no people hurt each other, a world of peace and complete harmony. But that peace and harmony wouldn’t be worth anything if they didn’t rise out of human freedom. God created free beings who could

choose good and evil. Even the angels are free to choose good and evil. We shouldn't wish away our freedom. In those times of 0% divine power and only human power, we can find out who we truly are. We may not like what we find.

And so, finally, we return to our story about the Black Prince at the Battle of Crécy. After King Edward refused to help his son, *"the knight (the messenger) went back to his commanders, and gave them the King's message. It heartened them greatly and they privately regretted having sent him. They fought better than ever and must have performed great feats of arms for they remained in possession of the ground with honour."*

Look again at that painting by Julian Russell Story at the top of this article. Put yourself in the place of the Black Prince. You asked for help. It didn't come. But somehow you're still standing. And now you're a different person. Imagine if the King had ridden in with a huge force and driven off your enemies. Now that the crisis is over, maybe you're glad you were left to your own devices. You're covered in dirt and blood and you feel half-dead yourself. But slowly, a smile creeps over your face. You've defeated the French on their own territory.

Enjoy the moment, my Prince. You will die of sickness before becoming King. You will be *"always a prince and never a king."* In a few years, a young girl named Joan will start the process of kicking your people out of France forever. You have won this battle, but you will lose this war. So enjoy the moment. On this day, you stood on your own two feet. In the following centuries, tourists will walk by your tomb in Canterbury Cathedral and look at your metal sculpture. If they learn your story, they will think, "One day in France, this young man was abandoned, left on his own, but he remained in possession of the ground with honour."



God isn't going to ride in and save us all the time. Even John the Baptist – even Christ himself – was temporarily abandoned. We will sometimes walk alone. It will feel like hell. We will change. We will be transformed. We will discover ourselves on the battlefields and in the prisons and we will wish it could all happen differently.