

11B SML 2021
MK 4:26-34

Judea has always been known for its hotter than hot summers and colder than cold days winters. But regardless of the weather, there is always a steady stream of false prophets. I was never interested in hearing these men with their self-serving messages about how to live and who to love. But from time to time, I would search them out, looking for refreshing water, only to find dry sand.

One day I heard about this man named John, John the Baptist, they called him, who would stand in the waters of the Jordan and baptize, hence his name. He told his listeners:

- ✓ to prepare,
- ✓ to change
- ✓ and to reform.

Something about this message, trite as it was, appealed to me. Maybe this one would be holding the key. Maybe something in his words would put the missing pieces into place.

So I journeyed to the Jordan to see John. Some called him a madman, some a prophet, but I withheld all judgment,

wanting to decide for myself. I'm a Roman centurion, and for those like me who:

- ✓ are in control,
- ✓ have a can-do,
- ✓ chop chop attitude,

John's words had some teeth and I liked that.

He was rigid, who saw everything black and white, either or.

- ✓ There was, no interval, no middle of the road . . .
- ✓ just instant demands, non-negotiable nows.
- ✓ tomorrow is too late.

John the Baptist was uncompromising in facing the good and the bad, the sinner and the saint. He used imagery his listeners understood, being impatient with the fruitless trees and the chaff in the wheat, and he was willing to make enemies. To those Pharisees and Saducees who came to be baptized, he shouted, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to escape the coming retribution?" Let's face it - repentance is not the most charming subject to win an audience, especially tough audiences like the Jewish hierarchy.

Enemies he made and The Baptist became a prisoner of Herod in the dungeon of Machaerus. He should have known

better than to mess with Herod. Herod is nuts and we all know it. At one time, John said something about decreasing. (JN 3:30) Did decreasing mean imprisonment? Despite the power of the government with psychotic Herod at the helm, shouldn't the axe fall on the Herods, and shouldn't the shovel sift out the Herods of this world? Then how is it the axe and the shovel separated the likes of John the Baptist and not the likes of Herod?

Questions like these are hurled against the gods in heaven all the time, whose silence is deafening even when every instinct of common decency would demand relief. Aren't the gods almighty? Where is hope when every prayer for release from:

- ✓ illness,
- ✓ a day without death,
- ✓ or whatever unbearable "this" you're carrying is denied?

To answer these questions, let me continue because eventually I made my way to, and spent several weeks in, the town of Capernaum. Just as my interest peaked in John the Baptist, so my interest peaked in the Man Jesus. I came to learn that the One John spent so much time talking about was

Jesus. To this day, I can't explain what came over me, or what good or evil spirit imbued this Jesus with such power to attract others, both His own followers, which was more comprehensible, as well as complete strangers, like myself. Buy I stayed, in order to be near Him and hear Him. It was as if He were God, but that's crazy thinking I know. Just telling you how I felt.

One of the consequences of my interest in Jesus damaged my standing with the Jews. That distance between them and me, which my position as centurion demanded, grew altogether too close. They came to regard me practically as one of their own, an honor which they had already conferred on one of my fellow centurions. The elders were sent to Jesus by my fellow centurion to heal his slave, and that's exactly what Jesus did. (LK 7:5) As I said, He is Godlike!

I admit that it would have been difficult at that time to distinguish me from any one of His crazed followers. There were enough of those! His numbers increased not only among the poor and ignorant. Jewish scholars and men of learning flocked to Him as well. Every day boat after boat landed in Capernaum bringing the mute, the sick and the possessed,

and bringing also others with nothing ailing them, who wanted only to listen to His teaching.

For nothing else, He knew how to speak. His style was purely Jewish, formless, loose and scattered. But He articulated vivid picture parables which connected to the minds of the simple folk, leaving an unforgettable image.

For His listeners who earned their bread by the sweat of their brow tilling and farming the land, He used simple imagery to connect the dots to their God. For example, “This is how it is with the kingdom of God; Day and night, the seed sprouts first the blade, then the ear, and then the full grain in the ear, and he the gardener knows not how. And when the grain is ripe, he wields the sickle at once, for the harvest has come.” And their heads with simple minds would nod in simple agreement.

My reluctance to leave the place could also be ascribed to the beautiful landscape and the gentle climate, nothing at all like the hotter than hot and colder than cold Judea. For on that landscape as He spoke of the Kingdom of Heaven in terms of agriculture, you could actually see farmers just like His listeners, earning their bread by the sweat of their brow. So not only did:

- ✓ We hear His parables

✓ But we saw His parables,
as He provided the answers to the questions I raised
earlier.

Shouldn't the axe fall on the Herods, and shouldn't the
shovel sift out the Herods of this world? Then how is it the axe
and the shovel separated the likes of John the Baptist and not
the likes of Herod?

The answer is found in the simplicity of His parables. Day
and night, the seed sprouts first the blade, then the ear, and
then the full grain in the ear, and the gardener knows not how.
But God in the kingdom of God? He knows. He knows. And the
demeanor of the Man Jesus leads me to believe that God is
the only One Who needs to know.