

I was chatting with a couple of other men after mass last weekend about our upcoming retreat at Holy Family Monastery on the weekend of January 17, which we'll be sharing with the men of St. Patrick's over there in Collinsville. I hope you'll be able to join us this year. It's always so uplifting to spend time together with men who are clearly the real deal.

As the three of us conversed, I was reminded of another retreat years ago, where I'd met a new retreatant named Vinny. He'd found out who I was, tapped me on the shoulder and asked if I had time to answer some questions about John the Baptist that had been bothering him for a while. I told him I was up for that, so we grabbed some coffee and went up to the Monastery Lounge, where the comfortable chairs are, and started to talk.

We began with the gospel you just heard, and Vinny asked, "Isn't this the same John who baptized Jesus?"

"Sure," I replied.

Vinny continued, "And didn't a voice come from a cloud and say that Jesus was the Father's Beloved Son?"

"Well," I replied, "all the gospels speak of a voice, but...."

Vinny stopped me in mid-sentence and asked, "...Jesus and everyone else heard this voice?"

"Each gospel says something different..." I began to explain, but Vinny interrupted again.

"So, look," he said, pointing to his bible. "This is Matthew, chapter 11. John baptized Jesus in chapter 3. Why's he asking a question like 'who are you?' if he already knows the answer? Did he somehow forget all that other stuff?"

"The gospel accounts of John differ significantly, Vinny," I told him when he finally gave me a chance to complete a sentence. "You can't just mix them all together willy-nilly. Different authors pick up on different things because they want to make different points. Just like reading and comparing different biographies of famous people like Lincoln or Jefferson to appreciate what was going on in their times from different angles, comparing the different accounts of John the Baptist makes for some very interesting Bible study."

Vinny nodded and took that in.

“But also like the different biographies of a famous person,” I continued, “since they’re about the same person, there’s a common theme that runs through all the different accounts no matter what the differences in emphasis or detail might happen to be.”

“What’s the common theme with John, Tim?” Vinny asked.

“You can see it in John’s question,” I replied, “when he asks through his disciples, ‘Are you the one who is to come or should we look for another?’” He wants to know if Jesus had come to bring hope or not. Was he going to free the nation of Israel the way it had been freed after the Babylonian captivity? Was he the real deal or not?”

“Authenticity mattered back then, just as it does today, Vinny,” I told him. “We know from other sources like the Jewish historian Josephus that there were plenty of folks around who claimed to be the Messiah, like Bannus the hermit, Hanina ben Dosa and Honi the Circle Drawer.”

“I’ve never heard of any of those guys,” Vinny said.

“Not many people have,” I replied. “None of them was the real deal, like Jesus.”

“I hear what you’re saying, Tim,” Vinny said, “but why didn’t Jesus just answer, ‘yup, that’s me, go tell John I’m the Messiah’ or something like that?”

“Seems to me there are a couple of reasons, Vinny,” I told him.

“Like what?” he wanted to know.

“Well, for one, Jesus replied to John using words that Isaiah used when he was prophesying the return of the remaining Israelites after the Babylonian captivity, where they’d been in exile. Everyone understood that it was God who had accomplished that, not humans.”

“Oh, so Jesus wanted to say that he was God?” Vinny asked.

“Not in so many words, Vinny,” I said, “but he did want to make it clear that Isaiah’s prophecies were being fulfilled. God was working in and through him. If anyone could see that, they’d know for sure he was the real deal.”

“I still don’t get it, Tim,” Vinny said with exasperation. “Why didn’t Jesus just say, ‘Look, I’m the Messiah. I am a very real and a very big deal, so shape up’?”

“That’s not the way love works, Vinny,” I said, “which brings us to the second point. In the way he replied, Jesus was teaching us something very important about love. Love becomes evident

by showing that it loves not by just saying that it loves. Think about the way it is with you and your wife. What do you say to her? ‘Happy Birthday, I love you, shape up?’ Not if you enjoy living you don’t. Jesus showed that he was indeed the real deal when he healed the lame, made the dumb speak and the blind see. He asked John’s disciples to take a look and see the love.”

“Authentic love is always gently offered and gratefully received, Vinny,” I told him, “you know that. It’s like the Eucharist. We can’t order someone to love us or threaten them any more than we can force someone to receive the Eucharist. Real love is unmistakable, but you do have to look and see for yourself. Jesus is that kind of love, Vinny – he’s very much the real deal, and his response to John’s disciples shows it.”

“So that’s what it’s all about then, Tim?” Vinny asked. “Prophecies and love?”

“No, Vinny,” I said, “There’s more.”

“Like what?” Vinny asked.

“Like everything,” I said with a grin. “With the Incarnation, everything’s different. The whole world’s transformed, Vinny.”

Vinny wasn’t buying that. “Look, I run my own business, Tim,” he said, “and I call things the way I see them. I don’t see that a whole lot has changed over the years, much less everything. What do you mean ‘the whole world’s transformed?’”

“We have hope now, in a way we didn’t before,” I explained. “To paraphrase Isaiah, Vinny, we’ve been offered liberation from hopeless captivity to evil by the free gift of God in Jesus Christ. Seeing that reality and taking it to heart’s a game changer. Choosing to become like Jesus is how we come to be the reflections of the real deal we were created to be.”

“I know some guys who’re the most unreal deals around, and they don’t seem to want to change,” Vinny said with a grimace.

“Well, you do have to decide to get on board before the train can take you anyplace,” I observed.

The bell for our next retreat presentation rang as Vinny pondered that. Getting up and leaving the lounge together, he smiled and said, “Thanks for the chat, Tim. You’re the real deal.”

“Maybe, Vinny,” I replied with a smile. “I don’t know about that, but for sure, love’s the real deal and frankly, it’s the only game in town.”