

# Text for the Times: *Advent*

by Gerald Vann, O.P.

176

Advent is dominated by the figure of John the Baptist, the Precursor, the man whose function it was to proclaim the coming of the Christ. It was a strange answer he gave to the priests and levites who came out from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who art thou? Art thou the Christ?' they said; 'art thou Elias, art thou the prophet?' In each case he answered 'No'; and when they said, 'Well then, who art thou?' he replied: 'I am what the prophet Isaiah spoke of, the voice of one crying in the wilderness'. The word to notice is 'what', and then 'a voice': as though not a person at all; just a thing, a voice, an announcement. And yet he could have been the figurehead of a great national revival; he could have led the whole nation after him. But no; when the Messiah did appear he sent his own disciples away, to follow the Christ. 'He must increase', he said; 'I must decrease'. That is why, if the Baptist is all that we mean by Advent, he is also all that we mean by humility. His one work was to prepare men to receive Christ; and he submerged his powerful personality in that work. He must increase, I must decrease: the work of every Christian is summed up in that: to pass from a self-centred life to a Christ-centred life.

The quality of being humble is often misunderstood and therefore it is looked down on. People seem to think it means denying that one has any gifts, any good qualities at all; they think of it as a pretence, and a grovelling sort of pretence at that. If you're good-looking you must pretend you're plain; if you're intelligent you must pretend you're stupid; and of course you must pretend that, morally speaking, you've just nothing at all to be said for you.

This is just what humility is not. Humility first of all means truth; it means accepting the facts about yourself just as they are. And that, for the vast majority of us, means acknowledging that some things about us are good and pleasing and some are bad and repulsive. It is just the fact that some people have good looks and others haven't, that some are clever and others aren't. Some people are kind and some are cruel; some are temperate in their ways and others aren't; some find it easy to be just, while others are always being dishonest. The humble man will look at himself and into himself as honestly and clearly as he can, and accept what he sees. But there is a second thing to remember. In the Gospels there are two sayings of Mary the Mother of Jesus recorded for us, each beginning with the word 'Behold'. The first is what she says when the news of her great destiny is brought to her: 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord.' It is a stronger word than that in the original: 'Behold the *thing*, the *chattel*'; and so the rest of the sentence follows almost automatically: 'Be it done to me according to thy word'. She is valuing herself, you might say, very low indeed before God. But then there is the other saying: it comes in the song she sings when she visits her cousin Elizabeth. 'Behold', she says, 'from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed'. You could say, at first sight, that is surely the greatest boast in

history: no one else has ever dared to say a thing like that. But, here too she is simply accepting the truth: that is, in fact, what has happened; but she knows very well that it isn't *her* doing, it isn't something she has achieved for herself or through any merit of hers. She goes on to say so, explicitly: 'He that is mighty hath done great things in me, and holy is *his* name'.

We have to do the same sort of thing. We have to accept the truth about ourselves whatever it is; and where it is a question of good qualities, of the gifts that God has given us, we have to recognize that they *are* his gifts – he that is mighty has given them to us – and so we have to try to use them, but to use them for him, to give glory to his name. We shall not use them if we pretend they are not there, or if we try to minimize them: we should be like the man in the parable who buried his talent in a napkin and so had no profit to show for it.

On the other hand we have to admit that most of us are far less likely to be tempted to minimize our gifts than to exaggerate them and then take the credit for them. Most of us can profit from sometimes reading the psalm which begins: 'Lord, I am not haughty of heart, nor are my eyes arrogant; neither have I moved among great matters and things too arduous for my strength'.

We have to accept our limitations; and the first limitation to accept is the brute fact that we are *creatures*: that God gave us such gifts as we have, and that our job is to try to use them for him. All those things the psalm is describing are ways of asserting *oneself*. Whereas our business in life is to try to assert *God*. That is just what saints are: they are transparent to God, and to look into them, so to speak, is to catch a glimpse of God. You have the same thing in Dante's *Divine Comedy*: when the poet at last, in paradise, looks into the eyes of Beatrice and sees, not his own reflection, but that of Christ.

We can try during Advent to begin to do the same sort of thing: try, very remotely, to follow in the footsteps of John the Baptist, try to prepare the way of the Lord by using our gifts, such as they are, for him; try in all that we say and do to be a little more like him. He must increase in importance for us: we must decrease in importance for ourselves. May he grant us that grace.

*NOTE The above is taken from the unpublished writings of the late Father Gerald Vann, O.P.*

---