

Second Sunday of Advent

The theme of John's preaching was: "One more powerful than I is to come after me. I am not fit to stoop and untie his sandal straps. I have baptized you with water; he will baptize you in the Holy Spirit." Mark 1, 1-11



One of the things that teachers try to do is to give students the satisfaction that comes from achievement. With the right kind of encouragement, students begin to discover that can master all kinds of tasks and clear various hurdles. As a consequence, a student's confidence grows and he or she succeeds in building a healthy self-esteem. In this context, there has been a long-running debate as to whether competition in the classroom, on the sporting field and on the debating platform contributes to or militates against the building of healthy self-esteem. Competition, of course, involves pitting one's strengths against those of another, and inevitably leads to making comparisons.

Whether or not we're in favour of competition and comparison is of little consequence, simply because they are very much part of the reality of life. We compete for admission to university courses and for job selection once we're qualified. Moreover, we consciously or unconsciously compare ourselves to other people on matters such as physical appearance, personal grooming and intelligence. We bristle when we believe our self-importance has been devalued by a shop assistant serving another customer when we are next in line. It seems that we are all conscious of doing our utmost to present ourselves in our best light so that nobody else gets an advantage over us. And all that is about comparison and competition.

So it's somewhat surprising to hear John the Baptist in today's gospel honestly and openly stating that Jesus is better credentialled than he is as a prophet and a teacher and that, as a person, he can't hold a candle to Jesus: "One more powerful than I is to come after me. I am not fit to stoop and untie his sandal straps." (Mark 1, 7) John himself was no slouch as a crowd-puller. People flocked to hear him. Despite his eccentricity and bluntness, he had become a symbol of the urgency of God's kingdom. Yet he had the capacity to defer to a man in whom he saw something different, something better. Self-importance for John became a non-issue.

How does one explain this kind of humility in John? I suggest the answer can be found by looking at the very significant role that baptism played in the life of the early Christian community, and Mark, in today's gospel, has the Baptist himself give us that answer: "I baptize you with water, but he (Jesus) will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." (Mark 1, 8) New Testament writers put special significance on baptism in the Holy Spirit. They saw the Spirit as someone full of surprises, who rattled cages and nudged people out of their complacency. For them, the Spirit of the new creation breathed over the waters of baptism in much the same way as God's Spirit did over the waters of creation. In this way, the Spirit created surprising diversity which saw a

new community emerge in which Jew found himself next to Gentile and free man beside slave. The same Spirit blessed the community with a richness and variety of talent, skill, temperament and background. And, the community soon came to appreciate such diversity as a sign of God's Spirit. As a result, people grew to welcome healthy comparison rather than be threatened by it. It was this Spirit that John caught from Jesus. And this is what Mark came to realize in retrospect and then record in his Gospel.

John, therefore, came to see his own talent and mission as different from those of Jesus. In the same breath, he could speak the truth about Jesus and the truth about himself. He resisted commenting about his own uniqueness because he found himself in the company of someone who set more store on diversity of talent than on personal uniqueness.

The message for us out of all of this is to learn to grow in such a way that we can welcome the emergence of the best in other people. This, of course, means being humble enough to let others displace us. It means encouraging the best in those around us, and not getting upset and anxious when we are overlooked. If we can do that, we just might be able to recognize someone like Jesus when he or she turns up on our doorstep. We might even see value in making a special effort to prepare for the coming of Jesus in these weeks leading up to Christmas.