

Rorate Coeli, the Fourth Sunday in Advent, A ✕ D 2009

John 1:19-28

In the Name of the Father and of the ✕ Son and of the Holy Spirit.

1 Who are you? What's your gut reaction to answer that question? A pastor, an electrician, a farmer, a homemaker, a teacher? A sister, a friend, a husband, a student? A Republican, a Democrat, an American? A chocoholic, a book-lover, a do-it-yourselfer, a foodie? An optimist, a cynic, an athlete? All of these answers are somewhat superficial. They only define you relative to others or things. But you are more than your occupation or avocations, more even than your vocations. Part of who you are is also how you do those things. A good husband is different from a wicked husband, even if they're both husbands. A caring neighbor is different from a gossiping neighbor, even if they're both concerned with their neighbor's business. No, the answer to the question runs far deeper than those things, which is probably why you're so quick to define yourself by your job or hobbies.

2 Who are you? was the question the priests and Levites came to ask John. They knew some of the details. They knew his parentage; his father was Zechariah, the high priest, and his mother was Elizabeth. They knew Zechariah's family history, being a descendant of Abijah, and also his wife's, being a descendant of Aaron. They knew he grew up in the wilderness community. They knew the crowds were drawn in droves to John. That's the source of their question. Who are you? Who are you trying to pass yourself off as? Why all this preaching? Why the crowds? Who are you?

3 But John won't answer their question. All he will say is "I am not the Christ." What a contrast to how anyone else would answer the question. When asked the question, when given the opportunity to shine the spotlight on himself, the only thing John can say about himself is "I am not the Christ." What kind of answer is that? What then, John? Are you Elijah? "I am not." Are you the Prophet? "No." Well, then, who? Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself? Nothing. That's the point. John doesn't talk about himself. It's not his job. It's not who he is. Rather, "I am the voice of the one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'" Me? I am

nobody. Just a voice crying out, just a finger pointing, just the herald of the One to come. He is who matters. He is the Christ, the long-awaited Messiah. "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world."

4 So who are you? What do you say about yourself? When the superficial answers fall short, who are you? If you are a husband, how faithful are you, or how faithful are your eyes and thoughts? If you are a parent, how dedicated are you to seeing your children in Sunday School and the Divine Service? If you are an employer, how interested are you in paying a fair wage to your own workers, or how committed are you to seeing your competitor's employees stay and do their duty? If you are under the God-given authority of your parents, do you obey them as you would the Lord? Do you do the same for the God-given authorities of government? How many parents neglected their children last night? How many families feigned affluence by going deeper into credit card debt? Consider your place in life according to the Ten Commandments. Are you a father, mother, son, daughter, husband, wife, or worker? Have you been disobedient, unfaithful, or lazy? Have you been hot-tempered, rude or quarrelsome? Have you hurt someone by your words or deeds? Have you stolen, been negligent, wasted anything, or done any harm? Even if you define yourself by pious-sounding labels, you cannot live up to the standard they hold for you. This mirror of the Law of God reflects deeper than the surface. It reveals all the way down to your core. The last thing you want to do is come face-to-face with the answer to that question: Who are you? The answer is pretty ugly.

5 You are not the Christ. Nor was John. "I baptize with water, but among you stands One you do not know, even He who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." You are not the Christ. Nor are you worthy even to untie the straps of His sandals. He is holy; you are not. He is not infected with the decay of sin like you are. You are not the Christ, and that's a good thing. It's not up to you to save yourself, to clean up your act, to make yourself more righteous. You can't. It's impossible. It's like trying to clean yourself with filthy rags. The harder you try, the worse you get. Either you end in self-righteousness or despair. Either way, if you end with yourself, you're damned. You are not the Christ.

6 The One for whom John prepared the way, He is the Christ. He is holy and perfect in every way that you are not. He is a perfect son, both of His Heavenly Father, and of His earthly parents. He is a perfect worker. He is a perfect groom to His bride the Church. Every commandment that you broke completely, He kept perfectly. He is the opposite of you. You are not the Christ. He is.

7 It doesn't matter who you are. He is the Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. He came not to call the righteous but sinners. It's not the healthy who need a doctor but the sick. Those who already have life have no need of the life Jesus came to bring. He came for unfaithful spouses and wicked parents. He came for disobedient children, lazy workers, greedy bosses, rotten brats, stupid sinners. He came to take your sin away. When you stop struggling against the Law's accusation, when you let God's clear word call you a sinner, when you stop looking for justification for sin, when you stop trying to compare yourself to others, then you can hear the voice crying out in the wilderness, you can follow the line of his pointing finger to Jesus. He bore your sin. All of it. And He died for it. There is a Christ, and you are not He.

8 So who are you? You are not what you would say about yourself. You are what the Christ says about you. You are the sinless child of God, the one joined into the death and resurrection of Jesus in the waters of Holy Baptism. You are a precious child of God the Father. You are forgiven, a saint, pure and spotless, without any trace of sin that God can see. The word spoken to you in Holy Absolution is more true than anything you think about yourself. You are the one for whom Jesus died, the one for whom He rose, the one for whom He comes today. Who are you? You are the "you" in given for you, shed for you. You are the "your" in for the forgiveness of your sins. You are part of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church, awaiting with eager anticipation the day of your Lord's return. Who are you? You are not the Christ. Jesus is, and you are His.

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