

**2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time
January 20, 2008**

John Allan Loftus, S.J.

“I did not know him. But now I have seen, and I give my testimony.”

These are John the Baptist’s words in today’s gospel.

The question is: What *did* John see? As Jesus walks slowly toward him in the early morning light, what really does John see?

He cannot have seen the miracle worker, the one who walks on water, who heals the lame and blind. All that came only later. He cannot have seen yet the great teacher gathering thousands on hill tops just to listen to him. He cannot have seen the young man who would, again only later, be hailed as the Messiah in a triumphant parade into Jerusalem. So what, exactly, did he see?

There is a cheap way to answer the question. We could just notice the revelatory word in all the gospels, “Behold.” That word always signals God’s special revelation. Remember the angels in Luke’s account of the birth: “Behold, I bring you great tidings...?” So we could say when John the Baptist says: “Behold, the Lamb of God,” that he just had a special vision from God. That’s what he saw. It may be true, but that’s the cheap way out of the question.

Let’s take the expensive route. Let’s explore a bit together. Because

this John the Baptist’s question really prompts a much more personal one for each of us. What do *we* see when Jesus walks toward us? Can we see the same thing John does? Who is this strange man whom everyone seems to want to follow? Whom we say we still follow?

John the Evangelist is too clever a poet and theologian to have us believe that John the Baptist saw with only physical eyes. His “sighting” of Jesus is not something that these eyes alone appreciate. John sees something in his heart—not just with his eyes. And seeing with the heart is always both more certain—and more troublesome. Even the “Little Prince” knows that when he says: “And here now is my secret, a very simple secret: it is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.”

Some might be tempted to think that John must have “figured out” something about this Jesus, that he somehow *thought* his way through to the revelation. Perhaps John was a better philosopher or theologian than we usually think—despite there being no evidence of that in the gospels. But I doubt it. This was too important an event, too important a recognition, to be left to mere thought. Even the somewhat cynical Sigmund Freud wouldn’t trust that maneuver. Remember it was Sigmund who once said: “...in the small matters trust the mind, in the large ones the heart...”

No, John saw something with his heart. And it changed his life and the lives of millions afterward. What did John see?

There is another way of asking the question. Have you ever met someone you would seriously call “Christ-like”? Someone who seemed to embody qualities that you imagine Jesus must have had? Many of us have at some point. So what was he or she like? What did you see in them? What is Christ like?

Most of us are at least in the process of discarding the harsh doom-and-gloom images we inherited from darker and sterner theologies. Thank God! Jesus would never have attracted such a band of followers with that image. No, the Jesus we are re-constructing in our own theologies, theologies for the 21st century, sense a gentle man who cradles children and cares for orphans; a peaceful man who embodies non-violence with every breath; a liberator first and foremost who yearns to set people free—free from their fears of themselves and each other, free from their narrow conceptions of God, free from their own smallness and darkness of heart. He is also a Jesus with a passionate and practical concern for the poor, a Jesus who is all-inclusive in his invitations, who is determined to create a universe of justice for the oppressed—finally and forever. Jesus is on fire to celebrate the real God!

John the Baptist might have seen all this in that moment by the river. And he would have been stunned. He confesses: “I did not know him.” I can hear John saying to himself: “I had no idea how much *more* liberating anyone could be. He loves this world and has come to set it on fire with that love.” Is this what John might have seen in his heart?

Mary Oliver tells a story from *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* as the Preface to her latest book of poems, called *Thirst*. “Abba Lot went to see Abba Joseph and said to him, ‘Abba, as far as I can I say my little office, I fast a little, I pray and meditate, I live in peace and as far as I can, I purify my thoughts. What else can I do?’ Then the old man stood up and stretched his hands towards heaven. His fingers became like ten lamps of fire and he said to him, ‘If you will, you can become all flame.’”

Perhaps that’s what John saw: the Spirit of God, of the God of Isaiah, the God of Abraham, the God of Jesus, resting gently like a dove and yet burning like a tongue or pillar of fire. “I have come to cast fire upon the earth, and how I wish that it would be kindled now.” Perhaps John, like Isaiah, like Paul and Sosthenes, like a great cloud of witnesses still alive, sees in his heart the flames of the only truly unconditional love the world will ever know.

What did John see? What do you see?