

JANUARY 11, 2025 FATHER RYAN NIGLI

In these weekdays of Christmas, we continue to celebrate the greatest gift humanity has ever received: Jesus Christ, the Son of God. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life." This well-known verse, John 3:16, precedes today's Gospel in which we encounter John the Baptist. Of course, we know John the Baptist. He was the one crying out in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord." He invited all to receive a baptism of repentance. He dutifully informed the people of God about the impending arrival of the Messiah, and he was effective, and he brought many people to God. He had many disciples following him, and they were inspired by him.

It's not surprising, then, that John's followers seem to be complaining a little bit to him about the one to whom he testified. They say of Jesus that all are going to him. What is up with that? And John the Baptist's response, however, is completely devoid of ego, right? It is the response of humility, the response of a man who is living out his vocation in accordance with God's will. John the Baptist was resolute against any temptation to seize power and prestige for himself. And so he reminds his disciples, "I already told you. I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him." John the Baptist knows who God is. He knows who Jesus is, right? The Son of God. And he knows who he is in relationship to Jesus: the one called to prepare the way. Now that Jesus has arrived and soon will begin his ministry, after we celebrate tomorrow the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, you know, John is at peace. And he says so himself, right? "My joy has been fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease."

In his commentary on John's Gospel, St. Augustine wrote of the contrast between John the Baptist and Jesus. "I listen. He is the one who speaks. I am enlightened. He is the light. I am the ear. He is the Word." And a similar phrase that I have heard that you may be familiar with and might be helpful—I think is helpful to keep in mind in our spiritual life. He is God and I am not. Like John the Baptist, we need to know clearly who God is, who we are in relationship to him, and to live accordingly. We are not God. We cannot control our lives, our circumstances. We can control some things, certainly. But maybe like me, at different times in your life or in different situations, you have tried to control everything and have discovered the limitations of your humanity. It can be a very frustrating reality when things don't work out exactly the way we want them to.

Some of the disciples of John the Baptist might have been upset that people were leaving to follow this new guy, Jesus. "He must increase. I must decrease." There is peace when we realize that ultimately, God is in charge; when we recognize, right, that we are God's children and that God is our loving Father who wants to provide for us. In the first reading, St. John the Evangelist reminds us of this reality. We are God's children. And as one biblical commentary notes, a consequence of being a child of God is the realization that we are loved and that everything works for the good. So, we don't need to be in control, but we need to trust. And that doesn't mean being passive. Our identity as children of God should actually make us bold, and St. John writes that "If we ask anything according to God's will, he hears us." What is his will? As I said at the beginning of this homily, right, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life." His will, his desire is that we would believe in his Son, and that we may be led into eternal life. So, anything that we ask for that will help us to get to heaven will be given to us. That

doesn't mean we will be given an easy or a smooth journey, for trials and difficulties help us as well to grow in faith and perseverance. We are God's children, called to live with our heavenly Father in eternity. We must live our lives accordingly.

So, let us follow the example of St. John the Baptist, recognizing who God is and humbly serving him, as we are each called to do in our own lives, in our particular vocations. Then can our joy be fulfilled, and we can say with the psalmist today, "Let the children of Zion rejoice in their King, for the Lord takes pleasure in his people. He adorns the humble with victory."