

Strong and True
3rd Sunday of Advent (A)
(Mt 11:2-11)

Jesus tells his followers they are to be prophets “greater” than John the Baptist, who was the greatest prophet of the Old Testament: “*the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he*” (Mt 11:11). John died without the benefit of experiencing for himself the mighty deeds of the Messiah, he had to hear of them in prison from others. We on the other hand have experienced his death and Resurrection for ourselves, as well as the preaching of the Apostles recorded in the Gospels. We have the benefit of the Church, with her living sacraments of Christ’s presence, enabling us to point to Christ in a way John never could.

Nevertheless, John is still the perfect model for how to be a prophet, and Jesus shows this through a couple of rhetorical questions. He asks his disciples what they went to the desert to see, a “*reed swayed by the wind?*” (Mt 11:7).

A prophet is not someone who is “wishy-washy,” overly diplomatic in his language, swayed by public opinion or influenced by peer pressure. He is not “politically correct.” Instead, he has firm knowledge and conviction of the truth, which he proclaims clearly and authoritatively. Truth is objective and eternal, solid like a rock and not changeable like the wind. A prophet is not a moral relativist, situationalist, consequentialist, evolutionist, or behaviorist. He does not explain away or minimize moral evil. Right is right and wrong is wrong.

A prophet is strong in the truth. Unlike the “*reed swayed by the wind,*” the prophet is a man of principle, conviction, and fearless courage. He will speak the truth even if it means suffering persecution and martyrdom. When Jesus tells the crowds about John’s greatness, he is currently sitting in prison for speaking out against the king’s adulterous marriage. His head will soon be served up at the banquet of the elites for his crime of daring to speak against the immorality of his time.

Jesus also asks if they went out to see “*someone dressed in fine clothing*” (Mt 11:8). A prophet not only resists the pressures and errors of politics through strength and conviction, he eschews the false and corrupted values of that society, upon which the errors are constructed. He embraces a “counter-cultural” lifestyle which itself is a prophetic sign. John physically removed himself from the cities and lived in the desert. He lived in a simple way directly off the land and animals, dressed in camel skin and subsisting on locusts and wild honey. He is not interested in the latest fads and fashions, he doesn’t need to impress anyone by his outward appearance and clothing, and status means nothing to him.

It is not the outward “image” that is important, but rather the inner truth. A prophet is an authentic person, not trying to be someone he is not, but humble before God, self-aware, and self-possessed. A prophet is not only strong in the outward proclamation of truth, but strong and secure within himself. He therefore does not need the props and masks offered by the world to bolster self-worth, and he positively rejects what the world deems important and necessary.

By living in the desert, the prophet is also free from the distractions and cacophony of the world which obscures and drowns out the voice of God. The secret to the prophet’s strength is God’s Word, heard through the reading and study of Scripture, and also heard directly within the heart through sincere and constant prayer.

The prophetic voice of the Church is needed today more than ever. With the tremendous power of social media to manipulate and spread propaganda; with the increasingly tyrannical efforts to censor and cancel dissenting voices; with the blatant efforts to sow confusion, to control and deceive weak people; with so much blasphemy against God in the denigration of human sexuality, marriage, and sacredness of life, *we need prophets!* Beginning with clergy, we need Catholics who are deeply rooted and formed in God’s Word, Church teaching, and the Tradition of faith; and who are firmly convicted in the truth, able to proclaim it in the face of opposition.

These are the end-times, when the anti-christ will deceive and lead many into apostasy. The prophets must remain strong and true. The Church must be the voice in the desert, preparing the people of this generation for the coming of the Lord, by continuing to work the mighty deeds of Jesus (Mt 11:5). We must open people’s eyes to the truth; help them not to be paralyzed into inaction; show them how to wash off the filth of sin and impurity by which the world infects them; teach them how to hear God’s word; give them the new life of Baptism; and lead them to the true riches of God’s Kingdom.