

## Closing Prayer

O God, most high and most near,  
you send glad tidings to the lowly,  
you hide not your face from the poor;  
those who dwell in darkness you call into the light.

Take away our blindness,  
remove the hardness of our hearts,  
and form us into a humble people,  
that, at the advent of your Son,  
we may recognize him in our midst  
and find joy in his saving presence.

We ask this through him whose coming is certain,  
whose day draws near:  
your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ,  
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
God for ever and ever.

*ICEL Collect for Advent 3, Year B, Opening prayers<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>3</sup> *Opening prayers : scripture-related collects for the years A, B and C from the sacramentary / International Commission on English in the Liturgy. – Norwich : Canterbury Press, 1999.*

## The Third Sunday of Advent

*(Sunday between 11 and 17 December inclusive)*

### Principal Service readings

Isaiah 61.1-4, 8-11	Good news to the oppressed; thanksgiving for saving justice
Psalm 126	Song of the returning exiles
<i>or Canticle:</i> Luke 1.46b-55	The Magnificat
1 Thessalonians 5.16-24	Always rejoice and pray; don't stifle the Spirit
John 1.6-8, 19-28	John the Baptist, a voice crying out in the wilderness

### Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ,  
speak to our hearts in the stillness,  
keep us steadfast in the foundation that cannot be shaken,  
lift up our eyes to behold the vision of your glory;  
and perfect our faith, now and always. Amen.

*Society of Saint Francis*

### Gospel Reading

#### *The witness of John the Baptist*

<sup>6</sup>There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. <sup>7</sup>He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. <sup>8</sup>He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

<sup>19</sup>This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?' <sup>20</sup>He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, 'I am not the Messiah.' <sup>21</sup>And they asked him, 'What then? Are you Elijah?' He said, 'I am not.' 'Are you the prophet?' He answered, 'No.' <sup>22</sup>Then they said to him, 'Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?' <sup>23</sup>He said,

'I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,  
"Make straight the way of the Lord",

as the prophet Isaiah said.

<sup>24</sup>Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. <sup>25</sup>They asked him, 'Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?' <sup>26</sup>John answered them, 'I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, <sup>27</sup>the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of

his sandal.’<sup>28</sup>This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

*John 1.6-8, 19-28 NRSV'*

## Comments and Questions

The first five verses of the gospel are philosophical and poetic. There is a sudden change in verse 6 when there is a switch to narrative mode and a description of the role of John the Baptist. Many scholars regard this as a secondary addition to the prologue, but it is essential to the structure and message presented. John wasn't just any man, for he was sent by God (1.6). He was part of the divine plan. He came as a witness to the light. He was not the light itself, but witnessed to it.

Some verses are skipped and the focus continues on John. Again, John's identity is brought up: 'Who are you?' the priest and Levites sent from Jerusalem ask him (1.19). Already we are given the information that his critics do not know who he is, so they do not know about God's plan. He denies that he is the Messiah, or Elijah or another prophet. For hundreds of years Jews had read in the Bible that Elijah was expected to return before the 'day of the Lord' (Malachi 4.5). Elijah hadn't died in the normal way but had been taken up into heaven directly (2 Kings 2). However, despite his denials, John sees himself having a prophetic role and quotes Isaiah 40.3 about being a lone voice from the desert. His critics seem disturbed that he is baptizing people. There is little evidence of messianic baptism in first century Judaism, but those sent from Jerusalem seek an answer. It may have connections with the baptismal practices of the sectarian community at Qumran (see 1QS 4.20-22), and the association of his activity with the Messiah, Elijah, and the prophet (1.21, 24-25) indicates that the discussion is taking place within the context of Jewish messianic expectation. John raises the conversation to another level when he says that he is only baptizing with water but there is another coming, currently unknown to his critics, who is much more significant. The implication is that they should be more concerned about this.

<sup>1</sup> *New Revised Standard Version Bible* is copyright © 1989 Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

## Quotations

1

The entire existence of the Forerunner of Jesus was nourished by his relationship with God, particularly the period he spent in desert regions (cf. Lk 1:80).

*Pope Benedict XVI<sup>2</sup>*

2

In this brief interchange we see that the Jewish authorities believe they are capable of passing judgement on religious claims, presumably on the basis of their understanding of Scripture. They come to the Baptist as those who know God's ways, even possessing a list by which to evaluate him. But when the Baptist quotes from Scripture to identify himself (v. 23) they ignore it entirely (v. 25). Despite their desire to be loyal to God, they lack an openness to God and his Scripture.

This lack of genuine openness is matched by a lack of personal desire. The Jews of Jerusalem are not interested enough to come themselves (v. 19), and those who come are not themselves interested—they only want to have an answer for those who sent them (v. 22; contrast Mt 3:7). So even when they ask what seems to be an open question (v. 22), they do so with a closed attitude of indifference. Such an attitude can never receive spiritual instruction, and therefore true teachers will not accommodate such spiritual voyeurism. Neither John the Baptist nor Jesus will cast pearls before swine. But while such people are not ready for pearls, it does not mean they are not ready for instruction altogether.

*IVP New Testament Commentary*

## Related topics

*For further study:*

Advent; reign of God; eschatology; Jesus Christ; the Messiah; discipleship; repentance and reconciliation; Christ's coming; future, past, present; Son of Man; parousia

<sup>2</sup> from the General Audience given at Castel Gandolfo, 29 August 2012.