

3rd Sunday of Advent 2019
St. Mary's Catholic Church, Richmond VA
Fr. Michael Renninger

Jamal Khashoggi was a Saudi Arabian Journalist. In his work as a reporter, he dared to criticize the Saudi Government. He even criticized the Saudi royal family. Eventually he left Saudi Arabia in 2017 because of death threats. He came to the United States and started writing for the *Washington Post*.

But last year, he needed to renew certain immigration documents. To do that, he went to the Saudi Consulate in Turkey. On October 2, he walked into that office in Istanbul. And he never came out.

As soon as he walked into that building, he was murdered by Saudi agents who had been sent there to kill him.

In 2018, at least 27 reporters were murdered around the world. Murdered for speaking the truth. Some were in Mexico, telling the truth about drug cartels. Some were in Russia, telling the truth about the Government there.

It's dangerous to tell the truth about powerful people.

++++++

John the Baptist was not a journalist. But John the Baptist was in some ways the ancient world's equivalent of a reporter. He was a prophet, and prophets expose the truth.

God often called on Israel's prophets to speak powerful messages to people in power. Sometimes, prophets were called upon to speak challenging messages to kings and rulers. Nathan the prophet challenges King David over his adultery with Bathsheba (cf. 2 Samuel 12).

That could not be easy. David was Israel's powerful king. He was also Nathan's friend. Sometimes it's difficult to speak a hard message to a friend. It's often dangerous to speak a hard message to those in power.

In the case of John the Baptist, he's been called by God to tell a hard truth about

King Herod. John criticizes this autocrat for divorcing his wife and then unlawfully marrying his brother's wife.

As always, it's dangerous to tell a critical truth about a king and his government. It takes courage and integrity.

John the Baptist has both. And it got him arrested. Eventually he was beheaded.

But before his execution, while he was sits there in prison, John was perplexed about Jesus.

Remember, John has been preparing the people of Israel for the arrival of the Messiah.

John *knew* that God was sending us a Savior. And John had a vision of what God's messiah would do when he arrived. John preached that the messiah would punish the bad, and reward the good. John predicted that the messiah would be like an axe hitting a tree. John believed that God would reward the righteous, and send sinful slobs to unquenchable fire.

According to John, when the Messiah arrived he was going to *clean house*. "Out with the bad. In with the good. Get ready. Everybody, every one of you – you need to repent, you need to change your ways. Including *you*, King Herod! Fiery justice is on its way when the savior comes!"

That is the messiah John preached about – preaching like that help to land him in jail.

That's the Messiah he expected. Then along comes Jesus, whom John baptizes in the Jordan. But time has passed. John is sitting in prison, and Jesus... is *not* doing what John expected.

John hoped for an axe – Jesus heals the blind.

John hoped for punishment – Jesus binds up wounds.

John hoped for righteousness – Jesus eats with prostitutes.

John hoped for a holy housecleaning - Jesus preaches good news to the poor, befriends tax collectors, embraces an adulterous woman.

No wonder John is has to ask – 'are *you* the messiah?' If Jesus IS the messiah, Jesus is *not* the messiah John expected!

John asks an honest question, from prison. And Jesus gives an odd-sounding answer. Actually, it's not an answer at all.

John's question was simple. "Are you the One, or should we look for another?" Jesus, are *you* the Messiah?

Jesus doesn't proclaim, "Yes, I'm the One." Instead, Jesus says, "go back and tell John what you see. The blind are being healed, the lame are walking, lepers are cleansed, the mute speak, and the poor have good news brought to them."

Notice, Jesus does not *speak* about HIS identity. In effect, Jesus points and says, "If you want to know who I am, then ask the people around me how *their lives* are being changed for the better by *my presence*."

Now, John the Baptist knew the Hebrew Scriptures well enough to figure out what Jesus is saying. In today's first reading, the prophet Isaiah describes how God will act when God decides to save us. You heard the beautiful words in today's first reading: "Then the eyes of the blind will be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be cleared. Then the lame will leap and the mute shall sing."

OK. John could figure out Jesus' message. Jesus is fulfilling Isaiah's description of God's saving plan.

But still – why would Jesus make John work that hard? John is in prison! Just give him a straight answer!

But maybe Jesus answers John's question this way, not to confuse *John*, but to challenge *us*.

John wanted to know Jesus' true identity. Jesus told him – look at the people around me. Look how my life is impacting theirs. *That's* how you'll know who I really am.

++++

Most of you know that I grew up in Pennsylvania, near the Amish Country of Lancaster County. The Amish are Christians originally from the region of Alsace. They came to America seeking religious freedom.

One day, a tourist – probably from New Jersey – was driving a back road of Lancaster County. She didn't know the history of the Amish. She saw an Amish man, standing on the side of the road. With his funny hat and big beard, he reminded her of some of the Orthodox Jewish men she knew.

She asked the Amish man, "Are you Jewish?" He just shook his head, "no."

Then she asked, "Are you a Christian?"

The Amish man paused, then he pointed to a nearby farm house. He said to the woman, "You see that house over there? That is where my neighbor lives. If you want to know if I am a Christian, the only way to find out is to go over and ask my neighbor."

Hmmm. Didn't that Amish man do what Jesus does? Jesus could have said, "Yes, I'm the Messiah." But instead, he shows that his true identity is revealed in how his life blesses his neighbor. The Amish man could have said, "Yes, I am a Christian." Instead, he suggested that the lady should go ask his neighbor.

Pope Francis keeps sayings that our Christian identity is *not* defined by our ability to quote the *Catechism* in Latin. The Holy Father reminds us that our Christian identity is truly revealed in our loving relationship with Christ, and in the daily actions we undertake to *care for our neighbor*.

In other words, if I claim to be a follower of the Messiah, I need to behave like he did.

Recently, I had a conversation with someone who did not know much about Catholicism. But she was sure of one thing – that *Catholics are not Christians*. Her pastor told her so.

I answered her, gently, by talking about Jesus, Saint Peter, the apostles and the Eucharist.

But maybe I should have answered her question *this* way:

"You want to know if Catholics are Christians? Well, during Thanksgiving, hundreds of St. Mary's parishioners donated and delivered food to the hungry. This week, 2700 gifts were delivered to families all over Richmond – gifts given by Catholics, to people they've never met."

“You want to know if we are Christians? This month, we will feed 200 people at Saint Peter’s. On Christmas morning, a team from Saint Mary’s will take communion to the women’s prison in Goochland.

“This month, the sick are being visited, the lonely are receiving Communion. The dead are being buried, and grieving families are being comforted. Children and teens are being educated, people who are cold are receiving hats and gloves knitted by the ladies of the parish. Prayer and worship are taking place. People burdened by sin are experiencing forgiveness.”

You want to know if a church is Christian? Don’t just listen to what they say – see how their neighbor’s lives are being made better.

And in these hectic days before Christmas, remember that Amish man. With your focus on Jesus, live your life in such a way that if someone asked your neighbor, “Is she a Christian? Is he a Christian?” your neighbor could answer enthusiastically, “Let me tell you what I see...”

(I am grateful to Rev. Ryan Ahlgrim, pastor of First Mennonite Church of Richmond for two key images used in this homily. It was from Rev. Ahlgrim that I first heard the story of the Amish man and the tourist. In addition, Rev. Ahlgrim pointed out the comparison between prophets and journalists in a recent sermon.)

Copyright 2019 by Rev. Michael A. Renninger. All rights reserved.