

I don't know if you saw it in the news, but an elderly woman in France recently had a small painting assessed that had been hanging on the wall between her kitchen and living room. It had been in the family for years and she thought it was a nice icon. It turns out that the painting was done by a Florentine Renaissance master named Cimabue (shim-a-buey) and was worth at least \$6 Million. I always wonder, however, how did the experts figure that out? How did they know it was *authentic*?

John the Baptist, after a long run as a famous prophet, is decaying in jail, with an uncertain, but probably bad future ahead. Following the long tradition of Jewish prophets, John has challenged the people to repent, to start anew, or face the wrath of God. We're not entirely clear on the relationship between John and Jesus – the gospels are vague. We infer that they are second cousins, but we have no idea how much time they spent together, if any, up to the time Jesus is baptized by John. Once John is imprisoned, Jesus launches his ministry in earnest, and it is apparent that John's followers are wondering if Jesus is the heir apparent, the next prophet to emerge and carry the flag of repentance and warning.

The problem? Jesus isn't following the script. He's preaching forgiveness, the kingdom of God, the Beatitudes. This doesn't sound like good ol' prophecy in the line of Elijah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. John the Baptist, a *saint*, a *prophet*, is confused. So, John's followers go to Jesus and ask the *authenticity* question, "are you the real thing?" It sounds a bit insulting, doesn't it? If Jesus says *yes*, he seems to be self-serving; if he says *no*, then he's claiming to be an impostor. So Jesus simply presents the evidence, much as a good lawyer would. Look – the blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the dead are raised! Come to your own conclusion. But why is this compelling evidence? John's followers were quite familiar with our first reading from Isaiah today. Do you recall what was said?

"Here is your God, he comes with vindication; with divine recompense he comes to save you. Then will the eyes of the blind be opened, the ears of the deaf be cleared; then will the lame leap like a stag, then the tongue of the mute will sing."

Believe me, they got the picture!

So here's the question for you. Who do you expect to show up on Christmas? What kind of a Messiah are *you* expecting? Bear with me a moment. Let's say that I was to tell you that Jesus Christ was going to walk through that door in five minutes. What would you expect him to look like? In this time? In this place? Think about it. What would you expect? What if Jesus said to you personally, "Friend, what do you want me to do for you right now?" Some of you might say, "heal my mother." Some might say, "stop the wars in the world." Some might say, "let my team win today". Some might say, "take me to heaven right now". Some might say, "send this person or that person to hell where they belong". What would *you* ask of Jesus? Okay, got your request in mind?

Are you ready for his answer? Here it is. Jesus says, "I have come to give sight to the blind, cleanse the lepers, make the outcast presentable, make the lame to walk, open the ears of the deaf, and raise the dead." Does your request qualify? Are you in synch with my mission? If so, your wish is granted. Otherwise, I'm sorry, no.

If Jesus' answer is disappointing to you, you are not alone. John's disciples were probably disappointed too. We want Jesus to follow our agenda, our recipe for making the world better. Jesus is all about healing, forgiveness and inclusiveness. You see, Jesus not only heals, but he makes things whole, he brings nature back into harmony, he calms the storm. Jesus gives us a taste of heaven – there's no doubt that everyone in heaven will be truly whole, physically, spiritually, and emotionally. This is why Jesus says that the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John. They are whole. We celebrate the hope of that destiny this Sunday, this third Sunday, called *Gaudete* or *Rejoice* Sunday.

Jesus wants everyone to be in heaven, everyone to be whole, everyone to be happy that everyone else is there. If your idea of heaven is everyone *except*....then you've got some soul work to do. We have ten days to go. Jesus is open to your pain, your brokenness. Ask him to heal you, and oh by the way, heal everyone else too. Heaven is big enough for everyone. Can you handle that? Ask Jesus to come into your heart today, he's the true Master, not just at the time of the Renaissance, but now and always.

Before I close today, I want to give you all a heads up. We're going to see a lot of unfamiliar faces on December 24th and 25th. Eye roll. There's two ways to look at this reality. We can be resentful as in, "I've earned my pew

seat – who the heck are you?” or we can see the opportunity God has ushered through the door. These people, often labeled *C&E Catholics* or *Chreasters*, are part of the family we don't see too often. Our Pastoral Council evangelization committee got together and asked a simple question – how do we get them to come back? We have an idea.

Alpha is a program that is designed for people who are on the margins of the faith walk. They may have been baptized, even educated in a Catholic school, but something didn't take. It doesn't matter why particularly, but I am absolutely sure that they have the same life challenges that we all have, the same questions, and the same hole in their hearts. This is what Alpha covers. Eleven weeks, each session consisting of a simple meal, a video, and open discussion. Nothing more. We have a team ready to welcome them, feed them, and listen to them. Every person attending St. James on Christmas will get an invitation to attend. If you feel you need something like this, please come too. If you're already a faithful church-goer, you probably don't need Alpha, but you can still come IF you bring a seeker with you. Is that a deal?

Let's keep our expectations optimistic and pray for the best. We'll offer Alpha on both Wednesday evenings and Sundays if we get enough signups. It starts in January, but we need to start praying now. Let's see if we can get some family back....