

Advent III 2014 Persevering in Hope

Last week one of the headlines which beamed across newspapers in Jamaica included the following: “Atkinson, with World Record, First Black Woman World Champ 40 yrs after Brightha.” Brightha was the previous champion, albeit in a smaller pool. Atkinson, herself could not believe her eyes after she came up out of the pool and saw the results of the race. According to her she knew it was possible but she still could not believe it was happening in the moment in Doha, Qatar. Atkinson is known for her hard work and perseverance. Though she is much beloved by Jamaicans she is always been known for taking silver and bronze medals in international events. Last week she broke the proverbial glass ceiling and made history. All Jamaican’s are proud of her, as, her achievement also mirrors the potential of each and all of us to achieve greatness.

Another great person we are invited to reflect on today, as we did last week, is John the Baptist. Unlike Atkinson, John the Baptist, though known for his popularity for using water in baptisms, was not known to be a swimmer – that is at least as far as we know from the Gospels. Nevertheless, John the Baptist, like Atkinson was known for his perseverance. He was firmly of the view things were not right in the way society was organized. Religious and political leaders were

generally using established systems to advance their own cause rather than seeking the welfare and wellbeing of the entire community. John was convinced things could not remain as usual and someone needed to say enough is enough. For his outspoken resolved to address a social evil, especially in the political arrangements at the time, John was killed by the state apparatus. Yet, Jesus, who was also killed by state and religious processes, was convinced John's case was virtuous and needed emulating.

In the Gospel reading for today, the writer has John saying, "it is necessary that he increase but that I decrease" (John 3:30). According to some commentators, it is possible there were divisions in the community led by John the apostle. Seeking to avoid factions in the community John suggests in the same way the John the Baptist yielded to the authority of Jesus so members of the Church ought to yield to the authorities in the Church. While the narrative in John's Gospel does not specifically speak to the use of power by whom and for whom, it is worth contemplating the reasons John may have felt the need to indicate **one person ought to decrease in order for another to increase.**

First, John wants to exalt Jesus at the expense of John the Baptist. John's goal is to present Jesus as a popular figure. To do so he must put into perspective the popularity of another figure that is just as popular. John's disciples, who are closest to him, are weaved into the narrative in a way which suggests John yields authority to Jesus. Whereas spiritual authority previously resided with John, now the writer gives such authority to Jesus. Jesus' ministry of baptism was apparently attracting far more people than John. John is not worried about the state of affairs as people's spirituality transcends petty partisan politics. Yet, it should not be lost on us that John the writer of the Gospel is wielding some amount of power through his influence on the reader. Such influence takes the form of lifting up Jesus at the expense of John the Baptist.

Spiritual cleansing is the first issue at stake. Is it John or Jesus that is able to carry out the most effective spiritual cleansing? John is clear it is God who has the ultimate power to cleanse people spiritually. Here the issue is not so much who is carrying out the act of spiritual cleansing as it is the fact that God is cleansing people spiritually and baptism is a sign of such cleansing. Both Jesus and John are therefore representatives of God's spiritual cleansing in the world.

Second, John's popularity must give way to Jesus' popularity. For John, Christ, who is the principle of giving and sustaining order in the world, is much greater than he. John is described as a forerunner to the Christ. John's power lies in his capacity as an ambassador. If power means influencing others for good, John's role is just as important as Jesus. An ambassador's role is to represent her or his government similarly, John's role is that of representing the Christ, who is God's real presence of liberation in the world. Now that Jesus the Christ is present in the world, in the flesh (John 1:1), there is no need for an ambassador. Similarly, we who are baptized are not just ambassadors for Christ, we are the real presence of Christ in the world since Christ lives in us. We are therefore God's liberating presence in the world since God is working through us in Jesus who lives in us.

Finally, John is presented as a person at peace with himself. Joy is the word used to describe John's state of mind. It is this joy we met earlier when we lit the third candle on the Advent wreath. After the lighting of the candle we were told to rejoice. Whatever we think of John yielding power, which is the capacity to influence others for good, or, yielding popularity so that the power of Christ may be unleashed, joy is the result of John's self-giving. Who among us would not like

to experience joy? Well, the joy we speak of is a gift from God. John the Gospel writer says in the same way a bridegroom rejoices to see the bride in the same way people can and do experience joy when they encounter the Christ. Mary's joy at being told she will be the mother of our Lord made her rejoice in God. In the words of the Magnificat she says, "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour." Hundreds of people today long to experience this joy; what can we do today to ensure people experience such joy?

Next Sunday we plan to go to the homeless shelter to share the good news of God's salvation and the possibility of people to experience the joy that comes with knowing we are loved and valued by God. Let us spend the next few moments examining ourselves to see if we are indeed experiencing joy in our lives. Following our reflection we will sing the hymn "Jesu thou joy of loving hearts (CPWI #600). Let us meditate especially on the first verse as we embrace the joy of life which comes to us in Jesus Christ. Let us pray for a moment by asking God to give us joy in our hearts that we may rejoice like Mary...

Alia Atkinson knows what it means to experience joy; John the Baptist knew what it meant to experience joy. May we too experience joy in answer to our prayer.