

John the Baptist is a serious prophet – not a person one would like to meet unexpectedly, perhaps; a shock to the system; a challenge to the way we are and yet only a foretaste of what is to come in the person of Jesus. There is something of the journey into contemplative prayer which is going on here. First, a desire, an attraction, a joy, perhaps, at the prospect of change – and then darkness and confusion as this change takes place. We are bearing the gifts of our own good works, perhaps, to the prospect of conversion; as another feather in our caps; one more item in our curriculum vitae; a little adjustment to make life even better; a useful insurance against the bad times ahead; a topping up of our spiritual pension.

*Brood of vipers, who warned you to fly from the retribution that is coming?  
But if you are repentant, produce the appropriate fruit.*

Now, what is this appropriate fruit if not a realisation of one's own inability to bear fruit because of sin, because one is so full of oneself that there is no room for God? This is the self re-created in God's image according to our own image of God. And this is what has to change. Or, in the words of the Cistercian monk Michael Casey, once again,

*In our leaving aside of all temporal hopes we learn to live by a hope that seems hopeless. We no longer have the fig leaves of pretence to cover our native indigence, and somehow we are relieved that we no longer have to keep up appearances. At this point we begin to know what it is to be 'poor in spirit'. (Grace on the Journey to God p117)*

It's a painful business and a prolonged one, this coming to realise that who we thought we were is not the person we really are and *As delusions drop off, we become more violently assaulted by truth (p117)*. But touching ground in this way is ultimately re-assuring. We really do come to a point of having nothing to lose because what we have gained is God.

*The more we see the unwelcome truth about ourselves through God's eyes the more accepting we become of our own reality. Our love and self-esteem increase, because, now, even our self-love is shaped by God. (p.117)*

There is a passage back to innocence here, akin to that first innocence portrayed in the Garden of Eden, when there is no need for fig-leaves and the wolf can lie down with the lamb. This is *not merely a return to a guileless incapacity for evil that we see in children but to a sage and stable preference for what is good and true* (p.121) God in us chooses the good. And our Godly self-love is transmuted into God's love for others. This is the baptism in the Spirit which only Jesus – which only God – can bring about.

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