

John the Baptist occupies a prominent place in the Gospel again this weekend, but with a difference. Last weekend we met John in the prime of his ministry at the Jordan River. Today, John is in prison near the end of his life. John gives voice to a common experience in our lives as disciples or would-be disciples. “Has the commitment of faith been worth it? What “fruit” can I point to as the result of my efforts?”

John’s concerns are taken by his disciples to Jesus. Without directly answering John’s question about whether he is the “one who is to come”, Jesus uses imagery from the prophet Isaiah with which John would have been familiar that are now being fulfilled in Jesus’ own preaching and action—“the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them” (Mt. 11:5-6). In the person and healing works of Jesus, John’s work of “preparing the way of the Lord” has borne fruit! His commitment, his preaching, and now his suffering have found fulfillment in Jesus. John planted the seed. Jesus is the fruit! There is both great comfort and challenge in this scene for us.

Three weeks ago Pope Francis issued “*The Joy of the Gospel*”, and Apostolic Exhortation in response to the Synod of Bishops on the theme of Evangelization held in the fall of 2012. Commentators have noted that this document is Pope Francis’ “manifesto” for his mission as Bishop of Rome.

Early in the Exhortation, Pope Francis calls the Church, and each of us individually, to “prepare the way of the Lord” by being John the Baptist as we take up the challenge of living the mission of our baptism, confirmation and each celebration of the Holy Eucharist. The Holy Father writes: “I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very

moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day”.

Later the Holy Father encourages us not to become discouraged in our personal growth in faith, in our efforts to bring the good news of the gospel into our world, and to see it bear fruit.

He echoes today’s second reading from James with the image of the patient farmer. “Evangelization” the Holy Father continues, “consists mostly of patience and disregard for the constraints of time. Faithful to the Lord’s gift, it also bears fruit. An evangelizing community [*and by extension I would add, an individual disciple*] is always concerned with fruit, because the Lord wants her to be fruitful. It cares for the grain and does not grow impatient at the weeds. The sower, when he sees weeds sprouting among the grain, does not grumble or overreact. He or she finds a way to let the word take flesh in a particular situation and bear fruits of new life, however imperfect or incomplete these may appear. The disciple is ready to put his or her life on the line, even to accepting martyrdom, in bearing witness to Jesus Christ, yet the goal is not to make enemies but to see God’s word accepted and its capacity for liberation and renewal revealed. ...An evangelizing community is filled with joy; it knows how to rejoice always. It celebrates at every small victory, every step forward in the work of evangelization.

On this Gaudete Sunday, the Sunday of Joy in Advent, like John the Baptist we take heart in the small blossoms in the deserts of our life—a relationship reconciled, a long standing prayer answered, an injustice righted--as we continue to prepare again for a renewed birth of the Presence of Christ among and within us.