

“Three identities” Mt 11:2-11

“Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples ³ and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" ⁴ And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵ the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. ⁶ And blessed is the one who is not offended by me." ⁷ As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? ⁸ What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. ⁹ What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ This is he of whom it is written, "'Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.' ¹¹ Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”

Today we celebrate the third Sunday in Advent, and today's Gospel reading told us about interesting exchange between John the Baptist and Jesus. And about Jesus comments concerning John the Baptist. Who are you, Jesus? Are you the one we are waiting for? Who is this John the Baptist? Just some guy, or a prophet, or who?

Today we'll look at these questions about identity. We'll try to find answers about three identities. First, we'll try to see what in this passage is said about John the Baptist. Then we'll try to see what is revealed about Jesus identity. At the end we'll speak about one more identity, which is very important for us, but this we'll do at the end.

Let's begin with John the Baptist. He was really influential person. Last week we read that “Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him.” (Mat 3:5) There were a lot of people who became his disciples. In fact, there is still a group of people who consider themselves disciples of John the Baptist.

Jesus' question is not just pure rhetoric. “What did you go out into the wilderness to see?” It is important to know the answer. Who was this John? Jesus Himself proposed three answers. First, did you go out to see ‘a reed shaken by the wind?’

It means, someone who is ready to accommodate to whatever is pleasing to his listeners. We know that this is not a case with John. Even when national and religious leaders came to him, he didn't hesitate to rebuke them and to call to

repentance. The same he did with Herod Antipas, and as a consequence later he was beheaded.

“What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings’ houses.” If you didn’t go to see some people pleaser, what then?

Some important person? Someone who wears soft and expensive clothes. They live in kings’ houses. “John [as we are told] wore a garment of camel’s hair and a leather belt around his waist.” (Mat 3:4) In fact, at the time of Jesus speaking he was, indeed, in king’s house, but only – in prison.

“What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.” Indeed. You can say, that John was a prophet. For he gave a testimony about things to happen. “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29) He foretold that Jesus ministry will supersede his own ministry, that Jesus is the one about whom all the prophets prophesized.

But as Jesus Himself identified John, he was more than a prophet. “This is he of whom it is written, “Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.” Here Jesus in quoting the last prophet of the Old Testament, Malachi. For Malachi foretold that before Lord God arrives, He will send His messenger to prepare His way.

Listen carefully! God Himself revealed to prophet Malachi that He will send the messenger before He comes. Before *He Himself* comes. Jesus identified John the Baptist with this messenger.

That’s what He said: “John is not a shaking reed, he is not a wealthy person to adore, he is a prophet. Yes, even more than a prophet! He is the one who comes to prepare the way for the Lord God Himself.”

If this is who John is, if that’s his identity, then what it testifies about Jesus?!

Who is this Jesus? Matthew, writing his gospel account, already at this point indicated, who Jesus is, when he put it this way: “Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ.” About the deeds of the Christ.

Let’s keep in mind that Matthew is not writing his gospel account to someone who has never heard about Jesus. He is writing his account for the Church. For those brothers and sisters who already knew that Jesus was the Christ, who knew about everything He had done.

Why did I mentioned it? Because this is important to notice how Matthew describes how Jesus Himself indicated what His identity was. When asked by John’s disciples ‘Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?’,

what did He say? ‘O, trust me, yes, I’m the one. Just take my word for granted, for I’m telling you such a nice and edifying stories.’

No, it’s not what He said. Jesus didn’t appeal to His own authority. He pointed to His deeds. Go and tell John what you have seen and heard. It is very important, - to remember about all the deeds of God as they are described in the Bible. Biblical God didn’t come in some secret place to some very special individuals and didn’t reveal them everything.

No, God of the Bible does things in history. In our history. In history of this world. In reality. He foretells what He is going to do, what is going to happen. He challenges us to test Him, and when the right time comes, He fulfills what He has foretold. He can, for He is true God. He is the Lord over this Universe, He is the Lord over time, over history, over everything.

This is exactly how Jesus established His identity. He didn’t claim to be someone on the basis of ‘o, trust me’. He pointed to what He was doing. “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them.”

What Jesus was pointing to was the fulfillment of various Old Testament prophecies, when God Himself comes to restore and to heal this broken creation. Now, in Jesus ministry these promises were fulfilled. There was no need for Him to claim what was obvious to everyone who saw and heard about His deeds.

Blind received their sight. Even those who were born blind. The lame walked, even those who had spent their lives laying on bed. Lepers were cleansed, the deaf heard and the dead... even the dead were raised up.

The dead were raised up. Who can have a control over creation, who can restore what’s broken to its goodness, who can have a control over life and death?! There can be only one, who has all these abilities. God Creator Himself. The one who promised to send His messenger to prepare His way. Now He is here.

His deeds were known to everyone. They were not done in secret. All knew about them. Jesus followers. John’s disciples. National and religious leaders. Jesus enemies, His opposition. They all knew about Jesus deeds.

That’s why Jesus could easily replay to the Jews: “But the testimony that I have is greater than that of John. For the works that the Father has given me to accomplish, the very works that *I am doing*, bear witness about me...” (John 5:36) “... even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father.” (John 10:38)

We may wonder, why did then John the Baptist still send his disciples to Jesus? Did he have any doubts? We don't know exact answer. It may be that he did it for his disciples' sake. To assure them that Jesus is the one of whom John was preaching.

May be he himself, indeed, had doubts. Many Jews were waiting for the Christ who will come as Victor, will destroy their enemies, Romans and others, and again will return them the kingdom of David. Now, John was in the prison. Jesus wasn't even trying to free him. Besides, it didn't appear from Jesus ministry that He is going to overthrow reigning regime. What to think? Is He the one?

Let me ask you this. Do you ever have doubts in your minds or in your hearts? Is this Jesus the one, or we need to wait for other? Is this all true what the Bible says? Do you ever question its message?

When you experience difficulties, suffer from sickness or abuse, lose your loved ones, when meaningless and evil things happen... Do you ask the question? Is Jesus really God? Or you always trust God with all your heart and your mind and strength?

When what God does, doesn't correspond to what we expect from Him, we may question – is He the One? May be John had doubts. But where did Jesus pointed John's disciples? Look what you see and hear!

Who do you think is capable of this? People may expect from the Christ different things, but He is the Lord of history and He does what He has decided to do, and in a way He has decided.

When we have our doubts, and there are times, when we all can have them, then we need to remember that Jesus knows about our doubts. He knows your heart. He invites to look at what He did for you. He knows you so well, much better than you know yourself. All your concerns, and doubts, and worries.

That's why He sent us the Holy Spirit, the Helper and the Comforter to be with us all the time. To assure us of God's love, to assure that Jesus, indeed, is your Redeemer, your Savior, the One, who laid down His live so that you can live. It's Him, God who came for you.

As apostle Peter confessed: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." (Mat 16:16) And we can say together with him, amen, it is indeed true, that's Jesus true identity.

There remains, however, one more question about one more identity. Yes, about your identity. Who are you? Yes, you are also mentioned in this text. Who are you, what do you think? One of those who came to see out of curiosity what is

going on in this place? Or a reed shaken by the wind? As a one who says whatever your conversation partners are willing to hear? Or a prophet, as one who says things as they are, who speaks truth to your neighbor, truth in love, bringing the Gospel of Jesus in all its purity. Calling sin a sin, and revealing God's grace to its full extent.

Who are you? Jesus gives clear answer. "Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist." Yes, but who are you? Listen carefully and remember!

You are the one, who is greater than John the Baptist. Yes, you are greater than John the Baptist. For as Jesus said "the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John the Baptist." And you are in the kingdom of heaven.

So what does it mean, - you may wonder: to be greater than John the Baptist. What does it practically mean for you? At least two things.

If you are baptized, then God has accepted you into His family through Jesus, then you are a heir of God's kingdom. It already belongs to you. You have Jesus word for it. As it is written: "God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind." (Num. 23:19) "For I the LORD do not change". (Mal 3:6)

You can rejoice, you have God's promise. This entire book, the Bible serves as credentials to show how faithfully God is keeping His promises. What He has promised to you, - forgiveness of all your sins, eternal life, resurrection and new beautiful body, life is His presence, life full with joy and praise, infinite happiness... you can be sure, you'll get it.

Not because you deserve it, for God knows our hearts, all that we carry inside us, but because God's name is at stake. He'll fulfill all His promises as He always has done. For His name's sake.

What is the second thing? How are we larger than John the Baptist? For we give testimony on what has already happened. When John extended his hand, pointed to Jesus and said: "Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world," he was foretelling what is going to happen.

He was the greatest of all through whom God spoke about Jesus. Before John none had seen Jesus face-to-face, but even John didn't live to see the fulfillment of God's promises.

We live in time, when God has done what He had promised. What a message John proclaimed to those who were waiting for promised Messiah! He comes after me, He, Messiah, is among us. No wonder people were excited.

Yes, but what a message we have. He was born, as promised, He lived among us as one of us. He understands us. We have access to Him. He was killed as He foretold. For our sins. So that through His death our death could be defeated.

And the most important... He defeated death. He rose again, on the third day, exactly as He promised. Though no one believed Him, but His enemies. He did it, He appeared to the apostles, to His family, to more than 500 people at the same time. They saw Him, they heard Him, they touched Him, they ate with Him, they hugged Him.

He established His Kingdom as promised. You are one of its citizens. You. You are greater than John the Baptist. Now we all are sent to tell about this to all the people in our lives. So that they can inherit the same joy and riches which already are granted to us. This is how you are greater than John. For your message is even greater than His.

Today is the third advent. And we can rejoice for we know who John the Baptist was. We know who Jesus was, is and will be. We will know Him much better. And we know, who we are, - God's children and His heirs. Rejoice, and tell others. Our Lord is coming soon.

Amen.