

## **“His reign has begun” Mt 3:1-12**

**In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.”” Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our father,” for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”**

Today for our meditations we have one of quite well known events described in the gospels, that is, the preaching of John the Baptist, as he was preparing the way for Jesus.

“Repent, the Kingdom of heaven is at hand. You, brood of wipers, don’t even think to claim you are good and don’t need to repent, the axe is already laid at the root of the trees, and every tree that doesn’t bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.” I wish I had guts to preach like John the Baptist did.

This event may be familiar to us, but to appreciate it fully we need to have the same understanding of the world’s history as those people who heard John’s message. If we don’t have the same understanding, then we will not be able to comprehend the grandeur of John’s message.

That’s why, first, we’ll take look at how John’s listeners understood the history of the world? Second, we’ll try to understand what exactly John meant by ‘repent’, and what does it mean for us today? Third, we’ll try to unpack what John is teaching us about Jesus.

How John’s listeners understood the history of this world, what John meant with ‘repent’, and what He is teaching us about Jesus.

**First, how did John’s listeners understood the history of this world?** They understood it the way God had revealed it to them through prophets, and as we can read it in the Old Testament.

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, meaning everything that exists, things visible and invisible. Then He looked at what He had created and it was ‘very good’ (Gen 1:31).

However, when our first parents were deceived to believe that they can be something more than the pinnacle of God’s creation, that they could be like gods themselves, the very good creation of God was soiled by sin and death.

But loving and caring Creator wouldn’t leave it this way, therefore He promised that He Himself will take care of sin and death, and all the consequences of our rebellion, and that He Himself will restore the goodness of His creation.

This is what the listeners of John were waiting for. They were waiting for the Almighty Creator to come down, to intervene and to take care of sin and death and to restore His wonderful creation the way it was intended to be.

When John said “the Kingdom of heaven is at hand”, this is what he meant, and what his listeners understood, – that the day has come, when God Himself will come down and will restore His fallen creation, when the Almighty will intervene and will purge His creation from all evil.

Are you getting the picture? John’s listeners never thought about God’s salvation as an escape from this world, from this reality, or simply as a salvation of our souls, as Christians often do today.

Quite contrary, as the Bible reveals it to us, God’s plan has always been to restore entire creation, and to bring forth new heavens and new earth, without sin, suffering or death, perfect in their goodness.

This is how we understand God’s salvation, this is what our ultimate hope is, the restoration of entire creation and the life in God’s presence enjoying all His wonderful gifts of creation.

“Kingdom of heaven” is not to be understood as some kind of geographic territory, but as an active reign of God, when the evil powers of this world are defeated and cast out, and holy, loving and just Creator begins His reign.

Can you see the picture? It is about a change of cosmic scale, about the change of ages, about the beginning of God’s reign among us, about the Creator Himself coming down to restore His creation and to rescue us from sin and death. This is how John and his listeners understood “the Kingdom of heaven”.

This is, why John preached ‘repent!’. **And that is our second topic.** What did John mean by ‘repent’, and what does it mean for us? We often have too narrow an understanding of what ‘repent’ means. We often think it simply means to be sorry for our sins. This word has much richer meaning.

It includes the change of mind, turning away from our old ways and turning towards God. We can describe it as a call to become a new person, to fear, love and trust true God more than anything or anyone else.

This kind of repentance begins when we come to realize our sinfulness. When we come to see our lives as God sees them. When we realize that our hearts are rebellious against God, and that this rebellion robs us of God's blessings, and brings us God's anger.

To be a human is a wonderful gift of God. For each of you are created in God's own image and likeness, infinitely precious in God's eyes. Every one of you are created for blessed, joyful, peaceful and fulfilled life. Our sin is what hinders us from enjoying our humanity in its fullness.

Our sin whispers in our heart – “don't listen to God, He just wants to oppress you, to judge you, to restrain your freedom and to take away all fun. Ignore what He says, just do what you desire.”

When, in fact, every time when we act against God's will, we rob ourselves of God's blessings. He can't bless us if we keep rejecting His gifts. What our sin and devil portrays as freedom, in fact, is a foolishness and a slavery to sin.

Only when we understand, what sin does to us, we can begin to appreciate what repentance and confession bring us. They help us to regain our freedom. True freedom. They help us to recognize our slave-masters.

They help us to break free from them, they restore our full humanity and prepare us to receive abundant blessings that our God desires for us: good conscience, joy, peace, fulfilled and blessed lives.

This is what John called people to do, and this is what Christian life is about. Every day with the help of the Holy Spirit we try to turn away from our sinful desires, asking our Lord to free us from them.

What it means very practically, that we try to follow our Lord Jesus the way He expects us. We come in His presence in the Divine Service where He Himself welcomes us and blesses us.

We listen to what Jesus speaks to us in His Word and allow God's Word to reshape everything we do: our marriages, our families, our relationships, our work, our leisure, our future's plans, our priorities, everything. In everything we are to look for His wisdom and guidelines.

And as we experience Jesus' presence, as we hear Him saying “I love you”, as we fall more and more in love with Jesus, we can't hide our joy. We can't but share what a wonderful person He is, we want to tell everyone about Him.

We want everyone to experience the same joy that we have, to be blown away by God's grace and love. “Look, this is Jesus, He is my God and your God, my Savior and yours!”

We also need to ask the questions - who needs to repent? As John was preaching about the coming of God's Kingdom and calling people to repentance, also Pharisees and Sadducees came to be baptized by him.

John was very harsh with them. I wonder how overly sensitive Western people would survive what John said? **“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not presume to say to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our father,” for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.**

We sometimes have this perception that Pharisees were the worst people. And then we can say together with John, ye, give them more, they deserve it. But, nothing can be further from truth.

I'll describe what Pharisees were like and what they believed, and may be that will seem familiar to you. They were born and raised in religious community, today we would say that they were raised in the Church.

They were taught what is right and what is wrong. They knew it. They earnestly tried to live good lives, not to do what was wrong, they really were nice people. The call to repentance was offensive to them.

They were thinking: “I was baptized and confirmed and haven't done anything particularly wrong, why should I repent? There is nothing wrong with me. I know there is a god and he must be happy with me, for I am not like many others, I live a good live.”

Don't you think that there are many and many in our community who think about themselves like that? They are good according their own criteria, even as they don't know what God expects from them, and have no desire to find it out.

They are happy to rely on their own goodness. Why would they need this repentance, why would they need this forgiveness? Who does this John the Baptist think he is to demand such things? Or who does this pastor think he is that he could preach to us?

If anyone of you think this way, then, please, know this - the call to repent and to bear good fruits is for everyone. Everyone. And if you didn't know it, it is probably because you haven't been listening to what Jesus says to you.

But then don't worry, instead, rejoice! For it is so, so much better to hear this call now, than one day to realize that it is too late. For every tree (i.e. every sinner) that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. And, by the way, that is Jesus who determines what is good fruit, not us.

Thus, we come to our last question. **What does John teach us about Jesus?** When Matthew describes John's ministry he quotes from Isaiah the prophet: ““The voice of one crying in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.””

Isaiah was prophesying about God the Creator who comes to restore His creation. John was pointing to ... yes, to Jesus from Nazareth. Meaning, that in Jesus from Nazareth the reign of God has begun. He has already come down and has begun His work of restoration. He has come to fulfill His promises.

This is how John describes Jesus: “He ... will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” Who can do that? Who could give anyone the Holy Spirit? Who could purify the whole creation with the divine fire?

Only Almighty God Himself can do that. John here is talking about the Last Day, the Judgment Day, about the cleansing of entire creation. Jesus will do all of this. He is God among us. The reign of God among us has begun and happens through His Church.

Remember, the Holy Spirit was the One who assisted God in the beginning. In the power of the same Holy Spirit God will again restore His creation. This is, why John speaks about baptizing in the Holy Spirit, that is, about cleansing with the Holy Spirit.

John speaks about the new creation. And it has begun already. God has come down already. He has begun His work of restoring His creation already. As always, He does everything by His all-powerful and creative Word and by His life-giving Spirit.

And He does it here, in His Church. This is where He speaks to you, this is where He blesses you with His Spirit. This is where He re-creates you anew and where He prepares you for the age to come; day by day, week by week.

Part of John’s message may sound harsh. But it is given for our benefit, to rescue us from the slavery to sin and to restore our humanity, so that we may lead fulfilled, blessed and joyful lives. Therefore, blessed you are if you respond to this message. The Kingdom of God is among us. It’s here already.

And peace of God that surpasses all our understanding keep your minds and hearts in Jesus Christ. Amen.