

“You are greater than John” Mt 11:2-11

Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” And Jesus answered them, “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. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.”

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? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and 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.’ 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.

Did you hear the Gospel reading? What do you think? Are you amazed by the diversity of emotions that are captured in these few verses? Are you amazed by the diversity of joy that flows from these few verses?

Where even to begin? Let’s begin with John the Baptist. The last Sunday we reflected on John’s message “repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand”. Remember, by ‘repent’ John meant turn to God with all your heart.

By ‘the Kingdom of God’ John meant that God the Creator is about to fulfil His promise, to come down and to restore the goodness of His creation. It was to be the day when all evil is destroyed and justice and wellbeing restored.

That was John’s message. So promising, so powerful. And John was pointing to Jesus. That was in Jesus where all of this had to take place. But, where was John now? Was he witnessing the fulfillment of the message he so boldly preached?

What do you think? He was in prison. He was thrown into prison by one of the corrupt and evil rulers of that day. And we know how this ended for John. He had his head cut off.

If John was preaching about the Kingdom of Heaven being at hand, and God intervening to heal His creation and to restore justice, why was John still in prison? Why didn’t Jesus do anything about it? Is He really the One?

We don’t know for sure, who asked this question, was it John himself, or may be his disciples, who were not sure about what to believe. Anyhow, John sent them to Jesus to ask it directly.

“Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” Picture this happening! Jesus is doing His thing, there are crowds of people around Him and then these disciples of John ask this very public question.

“You know Jesus, John the Baptist was preaching that the Kingdom of heaven is at hand and He was pointing at you. We thought that you will do what John was telling about. But now John is in prison, and you don’t seem to care much about it. Are you really the One, or should we wait for other?”

What they were asking was – are you, Jesus, the Saviour whom God had promised, or is He still to come? Tell us so that we know! And what did Jesus reply? Look around and see what is happening!

See how much joy you can witness, 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. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.”

Maybe we are used to the Gospel message and it doesn’t speak to us as loud anymore, but it really should. What Jesus says here is a breaking news, it is a sensation. It is something that should shake the whole world.

Try to imagine this situation! 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. Have you ever witness anything like that?

Jana’s Mom is a doctor, and she often reminds that healthy people have many desires, but the sick people have only one. What is it? To get well. If you are blind – what would you wish the most? To receive your sight.

If you can’t walk, what would you be dreaming of? That’s right, about walking. If you have leprosy, and therefore are excluded from the community, what would you be dreaming about? Sure, if only I could be healed...

Imagine all these people! Imagine their joy! Overflowing. Our language is too poor to describe it. Imagine that just so, by Jesus saying a few words, they are healed and receive new lives. Their bodies are healed, their lives are restored. The things that denied them so much suddenly are gone.

Just try to imagine this abundance of joy and gratitude among all these people. Just try to imagine amazement and surprise, the mix of breath taking emotions. “You want to know whether I am the One, just look around?”

Who could do things like this? Who could by His words alone, by speaking alone make well someone who has been blind or deaf, or lame or sick with leprosy their entire life? Who?

Just recall our today’s Old Testament reading from Isaiah: “They shall see the glory of the LORD... He will come and save you ... Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy. For waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert... And a highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Way of Holiness... the redeemed shall walk there... and

the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing... everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.”

As Isaiah prophesized, God Himself will do this. And this is what all the people where witnessing. God’s healing and restoring power. It is interesting to reflect on how Jesus describes what was happening.

First, He lists different physical sicknesses, then death, and finally He mentions ‘the poor have good news preached to them’. We often get things wrong. We often fail to grasp what is truly important and what is not. Because we often think like people who belong to this world.

Thus, for example, if someone who has been blind is miraculously healed, wow, that’s a big thing. If some is raised from the dead, wow, that’s almost unbelievable. But what about the poor having good news preached to them?

Doesn’t sound that impressive, does it? But let us see! Here Jesus doesn’t speak about the poor in material sense. He speaks about the poor in spirit, the same as He does also in the very beginning of the Sermon on the Mount.

Remember, this was the first of beatitudes: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (Mat 5:3) Similarly also here Jesus speaks about the poor in spirit to whom the Good News are preached.

What a big deal? In all these miracles of healing and restoration Jesus gave people something they were not able of get on their own. However, both, those who were healed and those who were raised from the dead sooner or later died.

It was a big deal for them to be restored and healed, and to be able to enjoy their lives in full, but it didn’t last. But, when Jesus speaks about the poor in spirit hearing the Good News, He speaks about something much greater. About something that will last. About something that will remain forever.

The poor in spirit are those who don’t have God’s spiritual gifts. Or we could say they don’t have the gifts that only the Holy Spirit can give. They don’t have the trust in God as their Father.

They don’t have loving relationships with their Saviour. They don’t have forgiveness of God and good conscience. They don’t have the hope of eternal life is God’s presence. They don’t have the joy and safety that comes when we live and walk together with our God. They don’t have these things and they can’t obtain them on their own.

Who are these poor in spirit? We all are. You and me. We are the poor in spirit. We wouldn’t have any of these wonderful gifts of God on our own. But now Jesus has brought the Good News to us, that the Kingdom of God is here and that there is abundance of these gifts, freely available for everyone.

And why is this such a big deal? Because when you hear the Good News about Jesus, the words of God create a new reality, the reality of God's Kingdom. You receive a new identity, that of children of God, you are born of the Holy Spirit, and therefore you are God's heirs.

When God speaks to you, He also sends His Spirit in your hearts, and the Holy Spirit comes with all these wonderful gifts. Faith, trust, joy, security, hope, meaning, happiness, and so on.

This is, why Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Meaning, it is yours already. The Kingdom of God is yours already. Yours! And you have God's word for it.

When John's disciples left, Jesus made one more point, to affirm who He was. Continuing the topic on His identity, Jesus asked people, what did they go out into wilderness to see? He was referring to John.

Was it a reed shaken by the wind, that is, someone who speaks what people expect just to please them. Sure, we often want to hear what we want, but that wasn't a case with John. Or did they go to see some rich and influential figure? No, for those dwelled in palaces.

Did they go to see a prophet? Someone who speaks on behalf of God? Yes, and even more. What they saw was the one about whom the last prophet of the Old Testament, Malachi, wrote: "Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you."

Malachi told about the messenger who will prepare people for God's coming. Meaning, the mission of John was not only to deliver the message about what will happen in future, but prepare people for the coming of God's Kingdom, to prepare people for God's reign among us.

This way Jesus says 'yes' to John's question, - are you the One? "If John is the one who prepares the way before God arrives, then who am I? I am the One. See and hear what is happening, remember what God foretold, believe and rejoice, for the reign of God has begun."

Just one last comment. "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."

Each of you are greater than John the Baptist. How about that? John was the greatest among those born of women, for his mission was the greatest. But even the least in the Kingdom of heaven is greater than John. How to understand that?

John's greatness belongs to this age. But if you are an heir of God's Kingdom, and this is who you are, then your greatness comes from the age to come. That is, you are great for you will dwell with resurrected Jesus, in your resurrected

body, in this new, restored and healed creation, together with all God's chosen people. You are born of the Holy Spirit. This is what makes your great.

You see, also our joy is much greater than the joy of the people who simply received Jesus' gifts of healing and restoration. They were important then, and they are important also for us, but we also know that everything in this world comes and goes.

But our joy is much greater for you have already received the Kingdom of God, it is yours. Every Divine Service Jesus bestows on you His forgiveness, He grants you good conscience before God the Father in Absolution.

He strengthens you with the hope of eternal life. He speaks to you His love and wisdom. He feeds you with His eternal life and pours over you His Holy Spirit. He lavishes you with His gifts. And blessed you are if you are poor enough to desire them. For the Kingdom of God belongs to the poor like you.

This is the source of our joy. And there are not equal to it. For it doesn't come from this world and it won't end with this world. Be grateful and celebrate, for this Jesus came to be your God and your Saviour.

And the day comes, when you will feast with Him in Paradise forever. These are truly a breaking news, this is truly a sensation that everyone needs to hear about. This is what we all are sent to announce.

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