

“Upside down” Matthew 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’s Gospel reading is a harsh one, but probably as much needed today as back then. Let me ask you this – what are considered to be great and glorious things in the eyes of this world? That is quite obvious.

Those that are manifestations of power, and of money, and of success and of fame. Those that are adored and desired by everyone, those that attract the attention and loyalty of millions and millions. Those are considered to be really great things.

That’s how the world thinks. And this is where the world is drawn to. To such power, to such wealth, to such fame and success. And even is only a very few ever make it, the rest, the great gray mass dream and dribble for these things. They are on their minds, they fill their hearts, they drive their lives. Perhaps our as well...

For Christians too are often tempted to embrace this way of thinking, to use these treasures of this world to gather people to themselves. Those attractive things that everyone desires, that everyone likes and enjoys.

Many, many churches have become just like the world. Let’s give people what they want, let’s attract them with what they like, let’s offer them to address their desires and then they will come. And they do come, o yes, they do come.

Do you know which are the largest, the most numerous churches, if you can call them so? Those who have embraced this way of thinking, those who offer people what they want, – food and drinks, games and entertainment and some useful tips for self-improvement. They are able to gather thousands and tens of thousands of people every Sunday. Wow! Isn't that glorious?!

That must be the true power of God at work! How could we do the same? Imagine, if only we could gather so many people, then we could tell them about Jesus... sometimes later... perhaps... may be... or not...

Isn't that a great strategy? Don't mention Jesus, or repentance, people don't like it. No, invite people to come for what they want, for what they like and then... when they are here, we will find a way to bring the Triune God in through the back door.

If only we could gather them! And only fools would argue against such practical and efficient approach. If that was true, then Jesus obviously was a fool. Yes, He didn't get it. Worse. He actually did gather huge crowds, thousands of people, who came for healing, for blessings, and when Jesus fed them... that was the moment!

They even wanted to make Him a king. He should have used the situation, people were there. But what did Jesus do? He quickly sent His disciples away, and Himself left these crowds in hurry. How strange, why not to use the situation and proclaim them the Gospel? If only Jesus was as smart as some think they are today...

Actually, as you probably remember, the crowds followed Jesus and found Him again on the other side of the lake. And Jesus did speak to them. And when they heard His message, they could only say: "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it." (John 6:60) And they left...

Perhaps Jesus understood something that we don't. Perhaps He knew that the world has got it wrong, that the world sees everything in a wrong way, like upside down. And that everything looks entirely different from God's perspective.

That glorious and wise things of this world is nothing but foolishness in God's eyes. For our Lord victory is won in defeat. Life comes through death. Glory through humiliation. Power is displayed in service. The greatest wisdom is revealed through what is rejected and despised in the eyes of the world.

The great and glorious things for our Lord are not those that gather many people, – that is not His criterion, but those where His message is proclaimed according to His will, – faithfully, boldly and clearly. And today's Gospel reading relates to us one such unusual example. The ministry of John the Baptist.

Think about it for a while! Wilderness. Strange guy. Ragamuffin. Behaving strangely. With marginal lifestyle. Offensive and rude in his interaction with the most honorable people in their society. Preaching this unpleasant message.

No splendor of noble palaces, no soft and expensive clothing, no outwardly appeal. This is how the world sees it. But Jesus says that: “Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist.” (Mt 11:11)

No wonder that the Holy Spirit announced the coming of John already eight centuries before, speaking through Isaiah the prophet, and then again four centuries later, speaking through Malachi. Pointing to what is truly great in God’s eyes.

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.”” The greatest occasions from God’s perspective are those where His message is proclaimed clearly and without compromising.

Even if it is done in the wilderness, by poorly dressed man. And see what happened! “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.” Wow! That’s something! Why did people come to John?

Because it was the message from the Triune God, spoken in the power of the Holy Spirit. And people not only came to John, they also responded to his message. They repented, confessed their sins and were baptized by John. There was the divine power and compelling urgency in John’s message. “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!” As it is today...

“Repent!” Not the most pleasant, not the most attractive message. Not today, not back then. But you see, you can’t receive a gift, whatever great, whatever significant and precious it might be, if you don’t turn to the giver and don’t stretch your hand.

You can’t receive the Kingdom of God as your eternal inheritance, you can’t receive eternal life in never ending joy and blessedness, you can’t receive the New Heaven and New Earth, if you first don’t turn to the Triune God and don’t stretch your hand to receive these wonderful gifts.

But you God wants you to be able to receive them. John was sent by the Triune God to prepare us so that we can receive these divine gifts. His mission was to prepare the way, to make straight the Lord’s path. And how could that be done?

Yes, only the way John did it. By calling people to repentance. And repentance here doesn’t mean simply admitting that “yes, I am a sinner”. It is something much, much greater. Repent ... turn away from your unbelief, from your focus on self, and turn to your God, for His reign has begun, to Him all power is given, be loyal to Him, even as the grandeur of His Kingdom has not yet been reveal. For it will be...

There was such divine power in John's message that it drew different sort of people to come to Him. Many and many came with genuine repentance, confessing their sins and with their whole hearts waiting for the Kingdom to be reveal.

Others were different. They didn't want to repent. They believed they were fine on their own. Those were the good people in their society. They didn't want to change their ways and allegiances. But even they could sense that there was something in this voice in the wilderness.

Something that made many to come to John. Something that, perhaps, begun to look almost glorious in the eyes of the world, so popular John the Baptist had become. Something mysterious, something powerful was happening.

They wanted it for themselves. They too came to John to be baptized. And we can still see the same today. When people don't want to repent. When they don't want to change their ways. When they are not interested in the Triune God, or becoming disciples of Jesus, but ... they still come asking for baptism.

I wonder, what would happen if John the Baptist was still around today. How would people, how would we react to His honest and direct message, when he calls things as they are, instead of bending backwards trying not to offend anyone.

"You, brood of wipers... Bear fruit in keeping with repentance."

In other words, show in your lives that you are genuine, return to the Lord Jesus, be loyal to Him and His Church, follow Him, learn from Him, serve Him and worship Him alone, and don't make any foolish excuses! Because...

The Lord Jesus will come back, and then He will baptise, or cleanse this world with fire, and He will gather His people, those who love Him, His disciples, to Himself, and He will destroy His enemies forever. Repent, return, turn to the Lord and stretch your hands towards Him to receive what He so desires you to receive!

For as soon as we do it, our past doesn't matter, whatever we have done or failed to do, for as soon as we turn to God our Father, He embraces us with His two mighty arms, with His Word and with His Spirit. The whole Trinity indwells in us.

And as soon as it happens, we are united with the entire family of God's people, with all the saints from the beginning of time. Beautiful and strong. Chosen from before the creation of the world. Dearly beloved by Jesus and the Father.

Dear Brothers and Sisters, we are so blessed. Because we are here. It is not our own doing. It is only by God's grace. John the Baptist has done his job well, he has prepared the way for the Lord also in our hearts, he has straightened the Lord's path, the Holy Spirit has used John's message to remove our idols and to brake our false loyalties and to make us ready to welcome our Lord Jesus Christ.

However, we are not there yet. We are still work in progress. Our repentance is never fully completed. As Dr Luther wrote in his 95 theses “the entire life of believers [is] to be one of repentance.” Or as we read it in the Small Catechism:

“... the old Adam in us should, by daily ... repentance, be drowned and die with all sins and evil lusts, and, again, a new man daily come forth and arise; who shall live before God in righteousness and purity forever.”

As we hear today the voice of John the Baptist calling in the wilderness of Australian society – “Repent!” – may the Holy Spirit keep bringing us to repentance, that we can keep returning to our Lord and that His way to us is not hindered by anything, but that His path to our hearts and minds is made straight.

And help us to see everything not as the world sees it, upside down, but as our Lord sees them, as things truly are. Come Lord Jesus, come!

Amen.