

“Who is your Lord?” Luke 3:7-18

He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin 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.”

And the crowds asked him, “What then shall we do?” And he answered them, “Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise.” Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, “Teacher, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Collect no more than you are authorized to do.” Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.”

As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, John answered them all, saying, “I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

So, with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people.”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

Today we have such a great topic for our meditations! How do we say it in the Second article of the Apostles Creed? “I believe in Jesus Christ, God’s only Son, our ... Lord.” And what do we say in the Luther’s explanation of this Second article?

“I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my... Lord”. That’s it. Jesus Christ is my Lord. This is what we say. Every week. I guess as church-goers we are used to these words.

But, now pause for a moment! What do you mean when you say those words? How do you understand what you say? Jesus Christ is my Lord... Have you thought it through, what it really means? Do you really believe it?

And if so, then what difference does this confession make in your life? What does it change? Or do we just repeat what the Church says and the true gravity of this statement is often overlooked? Which is it?

Today’s Gospel reading gives us this great opportunity to reflect on these issues. I invite you to reflect on three crucial questions. First, who is your Lord? Second, who is your Lord? And finally, the third, can you guess it? Yes, who is your Lord?

Let's start with the first one. Who is your Lord? It is very alarming to read Luke's account. There were great crowds who came to John the Baptist from all the surrounding territories. They came out to be baptized by him.

Matthew and Mark have recorded that this particular exchange may have taken place when there were many of the Pharisees and Sadducees in the crowd. Do you remember who were those Pharisees and Sadducees?

Were they some immoral and worldly-minded unbelievers? Not at all. The very opposite was the case. They were the most religious people of those days. The most committed, the most observant, the most moral people in that society.

We could call them the regular church-goers of that day. Just like us. Active in worship, active in congregation, active in different religious activities. And this is the scary part – how did John address them?

“Dear brothers and sisters, it is so good that you are here!” No, John says something rather shocking, something extremely offensive. “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”

Wow! He'd some guts to speak that way, we need to give him that! But the scary thing is the issue that John addresses. He is genuinely concerned that those good, moral, exemplary, religious people, those good church-goers, that they have come with the wrong motivations. They hadn't come with repentant hearts.

They had come to perform one more religious act on top of all others, so that they could feel that now they are in good books, they have done all things that were required, now God should be happy with them, for they have done so well.

See the tragedy, see why this is so alarming? If we translate this into our situation – one can be a member of the church, an active worshipper, active in all church initiatives, saying prayers, serving others, giving to the Gospel and still...

... their true Lord is the Self. It is themselves that they serve. It is themselves that they want to glorify. What do you think, do we have any such people in our congregation? I think we can easily find the answer ... if we look into mirror.

The old Adam is still alive in all of us, and as soon as there is a slightest opportunity, he raises his ugly head and claims that he is the Lord, it is all about him. No one is immune to this. Not on our own. So, what should we do with people like that? Do they deserve to be a part of Christian church?

It is so comforting to hear what the Holy Spirit speaks through John. He speaks to such people the same words as to everyone else. Whoever you are, whatever you have done, whatever hypocritical or self-righteous you have been, Jesus invites you to Himself: “Come, repent, return to me, come, my brother, my sister!”

This is the first lesson we can learn from today's Gospel reading. External religiousness means nothing to God. He is looking for repentant hearts, for humble people who do not come boasting in their goodness, but who thirst for God's grace. No one who seeks Jesus that way will ever be turned away, no matter who they are.

It was also noteworthy how John cut off all the excuses that those religious people were using to convince themselves that they were just fine. "Do not begin 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."

They believed that something in them would certainly guaranty God's favour. Like, having Abraham as their fore-father. We sometimes can have similar delusions. We are X-generation people in the Church. Our families built these churches.

We have been baptised and we were confirmed in this or that church. "So what?" John then asks us. There is nothing in us that puts our God in debt to us. Nothing! Everyone who is brought into God's family comes here only through repentance.

Only by seeking and relying on God's unmerited grace and mercy. This is how we came here; this is how we remain here. Repentant, turning away from the old Self, and trusting in God's grace alone. Now, what was the next question?

That's right! **Who is your Lord? Who is your Lord?** Who is in the centre of your life? Around whom do everything in your life revolve? Who do you fear, love and trust more than anything? Who do you want to please more than anything?

If the Triune God is our Lord, then it is not for us about Sunday mornings only. It is not about giving Him some parts of our lives. It is not about using Him as a helper to further our goals and desires. Then it is about us fully surrendering to Him.

But of course! If the Holy Spirit convinces us that this is true – that Jesus has redeemed you and delivered you from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil ... in order that you may be wholly His own, and live under Him in His kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness.

If that is true, then you gladly cry out: "What shall I do?" John was very clear in what he said. "Bear fruits in keeping with repentance!" What does this mean? It seemed that we are embraced in God's family as soon as we come with repentant hearts; now it seems that John is still asking for some good works?

Do you find it confusing? There is nothing confusing. The Holy Spirit often uses the analogy with trees. Here too. Bad tree cannot produce good fruits, only bad fruits. Good tree cannot produce bad fruits, only good one. What John is saying is this.

If your heart is indeed changed, if you return to God the Father with repentant hearts, then the newness of your heart will inevitably manifest in the newness of your life. You will be different, you will have different priorities, you will live differently.

If someone says that they want to return to the Lord, but at the same time don't want to change anything in their lives, then they are not bearing fruit in keeping with repentance, they are simply continuing in their old lives. Which means that their true Lord is still the old and selfish Self. As John said: "Brood of vipers!"

But what shall we do? That is exactly what those many fellow saints with truly repentant hearts asked? That is what we ask when the Holy Spirit changes our hearts? What shall we do? How should we live if Jesus Christ is our Lord? Should we try to imitate John the Baptist? Should we abandon our previous occupations?

We could summarize what John said in two main thoughts. If Jesus is indeed our Lord it changes how we think about and what we do with our possessions, and it changes how we think about and what we do in our vocations. Otherwise put, it changes everything about what we have and everything about what we do.

The Holy Spirit gives those simple guidelines through John. Your possessions are not yours. They are entrusted to you. Not to try to secure your future, but to use them serving your neighbours, those people whom God has placed in your life.

We can do this by asking simple questions, like: "Dear Father, help me to see how I can use what you have entrusted to be to bless as many of those who are in need as possible?" And the other thought was about what we do, about our work activities in the broadest possible sense.

Again, it is very simple. Whatever your occupation, or your vocation is, do not abuse the opportunities, the power, the authority that are given to you. There are certain temptations and sins characteristic to every profession. John addresses two of them.

People working with finances and people employed in law-enforcement structures. Common temptation for the first is – to be greedy and to use their positions to acquire more for themselves. For the other, the temptation may be to abuse their power and to use it for their own ends. And what did John advise?

Simply put: "If Jesus is your Lord, then you will use also your occupation and all the opportunities that it presents to serve your neighbour, to love them as you love yourselves." That simple. Nothing complicated. In theory. But do we do that?

Can we do that? Not on our own. This is where we come to **our third question. Who is your Lord? Who is He? Who is this Jesus?** John's ministry was really impressive. Today he could be called – an influencer. That's what he did, he exercised the influence of God's message on all the surrounding regions.

No wonder many guessed: “Maybe he is the Messiah, the One promised by God?” In response John says something that has become like a proverbial saying and so we have lost its significance. This is what John said and he wasn’t falsely modest.

No, no, no... “I baptize you with water, but He who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” Someone mightier is coming...

Okay, John, how much mightier? “The strap of His sandals I am not worthy to untie.” To take care of footwear was the job reserved for the lowest of slaves. John, the greatest born of women, claims that He is not worthy do even that little for Jesus.

Think about this for a while! For it is true! “I believe that Jesus Christ, true God and true man...” – true God. The Holy One! The Almighty! The Creator! The All-Wise God, the source, the beginning, the end of all things... John was so right.

No one is worthy to do anything for the Son of God. He is our Lord! Of course, we need to put Him in the centre of our lives, of course, we need to fear and love and trust Him more than anything, all of that makes sense. So much sense. Of course!

But there is something that doesn’t make sense. The Son of God, Jesus Christ, your Lord, He did not come to be served. He did not come so that we could untie the strap of His sandals. He didn’t come to receive glory and honour and obedience that He so deserves. He came ... to serve. Not to serve as we serve our friends. That’s easy.

Jesus came to serve you, when you were still His enemies. Angry, hostile, apathetic towards Him. And He came to lay down His life for you. His life for you! He is the Lord! Your Lord! And what a Lord He is! This is the Good News!

If this is what true God is like, if this is what He has done for us, for you, if the Holy Spirit indeed gently convinces you that this is true, then we cannot desire anything greater than to have this God as our Lord.

We can only exclaim and beg on our knees: “Jesus, please, be gracious to me, please, don’t leave me, please, be my Lord and teach me how to live with you in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness. For there is nothing that I desire more.”

Who is your Lord? Who is your Lord? I pray that we know the answer. That we live the answer. That we proclaim the answer. That it overflows from our joyful hearts. That “as a deer pants for flowing streams, so would pant our soul for you, O Christ.”

May that happen to you, and may our Lord Jesus Christ transform and beautify your whole life here, and then bring you to be with Him forever. For He is your Lord! And what a Lord He is!

Amen.