

“Magnificence of repentance” Mark 1:1-8

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, “Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, the voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,’” John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. And he preached, saying, “After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

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

John the Baptist certainly looked strange. How would you picture him? Christian movies may have shaped our imagination. Our today’s reading from Mark also gives us quite a colourful picture: **“Now John was clothed with camel’s hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey.”**

He was quite a character by all accounts. And don’t forget where he was operating, in the wilderness, in wild and remote places. Strange, if not suspicious. Now, what do we have to do with this strange character? Why would we read about him today and even more, what is the point for us to reflect on this passage?

It is Advent, and John’s message helps us to refocus on what is truly important. So, what was his message? “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” That’s it, repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!

What does this mean? How is this of any importance for us? As Christians we believe that it is God’s voice in the Bible that calls us to Himself, it is His message that helps us to find out the truth, and that is why it is often met with resistance or apathy.

Our sinful flesh tends to perceive the Biblical message sound too small, too boring, too insignificant, nothing to be excited about. When the truth is very opposite. Take for example John’s proclamation: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!”

How does it sound? What thoughts run through your mind when you hear this message? How do you feel about that message? How would you put it in different words if you were asked to rephrase it? From my experience, repent has this negative meaning. “Are you saying that I am not good enough?”

Do you want to make me feel guilty?" Even Christians often restrict the meaning of "repent" to something like: "I am a sinner, and I need to turn away from my sins, stop sinning, and receive God's forgiveness!" Something like that.

But is there more to this invitation? There certainly is. This invitation to repent implies changing. We could say it implies moving or changing from one state to another. I believe that if we can clearly understand those two states, we will understand much better what repent truly and fully means. I propose we reflect on three questions.

First, what our current or we could say our natural state is. Second, what is this new state to which we are invited, and, third, how can we get from one to another? What our natural state is, where we are invited to, and how to get there?

About the first. What was the state of those people John called to repentance, or we could broaden the questions asking what is the natural state of all being born under the Sun? Our problem is not that from time to time we do something that is wrong. Our problem is not that we fail to live up to some moral standards.

It goes much deeper. It is about spiritual wilderness. According to God's own revelations, after the Fall all human beings are born dead in sin. Yes! Meaning, there is something deeply wrong with our very condition, with our very hearts. What is it?

We are born without the knowledge of the true God; we don't know Him. What still remains engraved on our hearts, gives the twisted impression that this divine being is all about restricting and judging us, making us feel restrained. By no means our friend!

So naturally, we don't want to know about Him, we try to avoid Him, we even pretend that He is not there. But at the same time, we are not free. We sense, we know that we are not exactly self-sufficient beings. We thirst and hunger in our hearts.

We need some help to feel good about ourselves and also to feel secure in this world. So, we cling to whatever promises to fulfill those deep longings. We also thirst for meaning in our lives. Why are we here? What is the point of this life?

When we are younger, we may still be optimistic, but the older we grow... What is the point? To struggle, to suffer, to be disappointed, to lose what you love and then to die? Sure, there are some bright moments in between, but they don't last.

We thirst for significance; who are we, just a dust, just a breath? Here we are and a moment later we are gone. And what hope do we have? What is there to look forward to? Yes, we have eternity put in our hearts, but we don't really know what will happen when our hearts stop beating.

And stop beating they will... This is our natural state for all of us. Spiritual wilderness. And, sure, the sun shines on the righteous and on the wicked, and we know how to keep ourselves busy in this world, how to distract ourselves from these big questions,

so we seldom reflect on this as seriously and as deeply as we should, but this is our natural state. Now, if this is what John was and is calling us out of, **what is he calling us into? What is the alternative? This is our second question.**

This is not simply about stopping sinning, this is not simply about being sorry for failing to be good enough. No! It is about so much more. The words “the Kingdom of God is at hand” helps us to appreciate it. What is understood by this phrase? How would John’s audience have heard and understood this message?

When we hear the word “kingdom”, I think most people picture some geographical entity, some territory, something like that. But that is not the meaning of that word in Greek. Much better way of translating would be to say “the Reign of God”.

The active Reign of God is at hand. God Himself is about to begin to reign among us. Now, what does that mean? For many among those who came to listen to John, their understanding about this world, about past and future would be shaped by the Holy Writings of the Old Testament.

How would they understand the message that the Reign of God is at hand? They knew that we live after the Fall, that entire creation is subjected to futility. They knew that God the Creator had promised one day to return and to reign among us again.

That the Creator Himself would reverse the curse of sin and would restore the goodness of His creation. They knew that “He will swallow up death forever; and that the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces...

They were waiting for this day of complete restoration, when “the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; when the lame man shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy...

When waters break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; when the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with singing; when everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; when they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.” (Isaiah 25 & 35). This is what they were waiting for.

This is what the Reign of God meant for them. Full and complete restoration of what was once lost in that beautiful garden. Relationships with God restored, relationships with creations restored, relationships with fellow humans restored. Joy and gladness...

This is what they heard in the preaching of John. That this time is at hand. Do you see how much larger this invitation is than simply “turn away from your sins”. It is about being called from our natural state of suffering and death, to the abundance of life in the presence of the Holy God. From being alone and lost in this fallen and harsh world, to being in wonderful fellowship with the Creator of all things and the very source of true life, everlasting and abundant life. That is how grand this invitation is!

Not that much has changed, whenever we hear God's voice speaking to us in the Scripture, whenever we hear the call to repent, this is where He invites us. From barren spiritual deserts to the overflowing living waters of eternal life.

From loneliness, unpredictability and hopelessness, to love filled divine fellowship, to loving embrace of all powerful Fatherly arms and to the living hope that surpasses anything that we could ever imagine or dream about. That's what this is about. This is where this voice invites you!

Far from being something negative, something belittling, this is the most promising, the most hopeful, the most joy filled invitation that anyone can receive. This is pure God's grace and goodness offered to you. "Repent, come to me, let me bless you!"

Here we come to our final question: **"How can we get from one state to another?"** From being in this spiritual and hopeless wilderness to the wonderful fellowship with the God of life and joy and gladness? How to get there?

Yes, indeed, how? How can we, being dead in our sins, find a way from this wilderness to the wonderful new creation, which overflows with life and God's blessings? On our own, we can't. And this is where today's reading brings us so much comfort and hope.

The voice crying in wilderness... Can you hear this cry? It is God's voice that still calls us! Those are His messengers which He keeps sending to us. And when we hear this voice, it breaks the sleep of death, it makes us alive, and it announces great news to us.

Something new is at hand. Someone is coming. Someone begins His reign. Someone is coming to lead us out of this wilderness. Someone who comes in the name of the Lord. Someone who comes with the power of God's Spirit. Please, notice! This someone isn't waiting until we find our way out of this wilderness.

Instead, He leaves His glory, He humbles Himself, He comes to us, as one of us, as true God and true man, as Jesus from Nazareth. He comes and He quenches our spiritual thirst. In Jesus we learn how much God the Father cherishes us, how much He values us, how much He cares for us, how much He does for us, what He has prepared for us.

Jesus comes, He makes home with us, and then patiently leads us to our eternal abode. What John was only preaching about, now has begun. Jesus has begun His reign and the day is near when He will carry us from this age into His presence.

So, yes, this is what John reminds us about. This is what He helps us to understand, to appreciate and rejoice in. The grandeur and comfort of this message: "Repent, Brothers and Sisters, for the Reign of God has begun, our God is among us, and soon we will see Him as He is!"

Amen.