

“Repent of your good works!” 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.”

Grace, mercy and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

John’s message. Or we can say God’s message to you. It is shocking. Yes. And it is offensive. Incredibly offensive. And it is comforting. So sweet and comforting. And it is freeing. The sense of freedom fills us with such joy and energy. Wonderful!

Let’s reflect on it step by step. Let’s use these three questions to guide our meditations. **What do we need to repent of? What does that Kingdom or the One who baptises us with the Holy Spirit and fire bring us? What about those fruits that John the Baptist spoke about?** May the Lord bless us with clarity!

First, **what do we need to repent of?** This is the shocking and offensive part. What do you think, what do you need to repent of? Is it of all the bad things that you have done, or of all the bad words you have said, or of all the bad thoughts that you have thought and bad passions that your hearts have produced?

But... What about your good deeds, good words, good thoughts? What about trying to be a better person, a good Christian? Do we need to repent of trying to be better Christians? Sounds strange? Hold on, and we will return to this a bit later...

Now, what is our human state after the fall, our fallen condition? In sin we all are conceived and intentions of our hearts are evil from our youth, and there is no one who searches for God, and we can say together with Paul the apostle:

“I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.”

The Bible vividly speaks about our sin as scarlet red, as crimson red. As our Book of Concord put it, our sin is “so deep a corruption of human nature that nothing healthy or uncorrupt has remained in man’s body or soul, in his inner or outward powers.” (FC, Epitome, Art 1, 8). Nothing...

We could say that we are sinfully red through and through, and nothing in us remains incorrupt. Whatever we desire, whatever we think, whatever we say, whatever we do, it is all tainted by sin. Whatever you will try to write with a red pen, it will be... red. Whatever we do, it will be tainted by sin.

Even our very best thoughts, intentions, words and actions. They will never be pure, they will never be blameless, they will always be corrupt. As a fellow pastor used to teach: “Even if you had an opportunity to be judged by God based on only one [!], the very best deed that you have ever done, guess what?! What color would it be? Yes... scarlet red, crimson red.”

God’s call to repentance is not a superficial invitation: “Hey, you, stop doing bad stuff!” The word used in the original Greek of the New Testament speaks about complete change of mind. About the change in how we see and perceive everything. Or as we have been recently learning in our Bible studies, it is like seeing everything through different glasses, the way the Bible reveals it to us.

God’s call to repentance is about us accepting His verdict on our situation, on how He sees it. We are red, red through and through. There is nothing good in us. There is nothing blameless in our lives, nothing that we would not need to repent of.

This is shocking. This is an offensive judgment. Isn’t it? But unless we answer this question right – “what do we need to repent of?” - we won’t be able to get our next question right either.

Our second question was – **what does the Kingdom of heaven or the One who baptises us with the Holy Spirit and fire bring us?** And this is the comforting, the freeing part of God’s message. So sweet and comforting!

Only once we begin to recognize the depth of our sinful corruption, we can begin to rejoice in what our God has done for us. Once we begin to realize that even our very best intentions, thoughts, words and deeds are corrupted by sin and completely useless in the court of the Holy Judge Eternal, only then we may begin to appreciate the gift that Jesus brings us as He baptises us with the Holy Spirit and fire.

“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Rom 6:23) No more, no less. Once we, enlightened by the Spirit, recognize that wages for everything we do is death, we can rejoice when Jesus offers to receive our wages and gives us the free gift of life.

Dr Luther called this God's offer the most wonderful exchange. The Son of God comes to us as one of us, except, He is not crimson red. He is holy, innocent, pure, perfect, blameless Son of His Father, as is His entire life.

Now Jesus offers us this unbelievable exchange. He takes everything that is ours, all of it, He volunteers to receive the Father's wrath and damnation for what we have done, He takes on it all, all our red stuff and its consequences.

And in exchange to our red He gives what is His - His white as bright as light itself. He gives us His innocence, His goodness, His purity. As He embraces us, He covers us with His holiness, He brings us His Father's love and affection, He welcomes us into the most radiant and blessed communion with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

Now as the Father looks at you, guess what?! He sees you as radiant and blameless as His only begotten and true Son Jesus. Listen carefully, for this is very important! Jesus takes care of all your red, in the past, today and in the future. He knows that none of what we've done is of any use if we want to stand before God on our own.

And He assures you, that you are forgiven, not only of your clearly bad deeds, but also of those which we may consider quite good and worthy. They all are forgiven, open rebellion, wilful neglect, ignorant actions, and less than perfect good works.

You are freed from all concerns and worries about how God will see you and your life on the Last Day. As pure and holy and deserving eternal life. Not because of anything we have done, but solely because of what His Son Jesus has done.

This is what this Kingdom of heaven brings us. This is God's gift to us in Jesus Christ, peace of mind, good conscience with God, joyful freedom to lead a life free from the shadows of guilt or shame, waiting for our Lord Jesus to return and take us to be with Him forever. But that was not all. We have one more question left.

Our final question was - **what about those fruits that John the Baptist spoke about?** For he was rather forceful: **"The axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."**

Okay, John! Now we are talking about how to lead our lives once we have received the wonderful gift of forgiveness and life. Some have tried to misuse such freedom arguing that now we can do whatever our hearts desire. Really?! To which Paul the apostle emphatically exclaims: "No way! By no means!"

The Holy Spirit often compares us with fruit trees. That is a very helpful analogy. Think about this - who do fruit trees produce their fruit for? For themselves? No! It is often quite challenging for them, especially if there is an abundance of fruits.

The burden of rich fruits may break some branches. So, why do they produce them? To show off how good they are? No! It doesn't matter. They produce fruits to bless others. Yes, fruits are always for others. They are not about the trees themselves.

Now remember the question that I asked in the beginning. Shall we repent of trying to be good Christians? May sound like a ridiculous question. It is not. And the answer is, yes, we most certainly shall repent! Do you see why?

Because that is not a question about bearing fruits, it is about elevating ourselves or trying to show off with our own goodness. It is about trying to do something on top of what Jesus already has done and completed. It is not about bearing fruits; it is about trimming our branches so that we look good in our own eyes.

We may have our self-made checklists. "If I do those things, and avoid doing those others, then I am a good Christian. Then I have done enough." Then we may be tempted to look down on those less perfect than we are. Repent of such desires!

Those are not the fruits of the Spirit, but the thoughts of the old sinful flesh that wants to rely on itself, instead of rejoicing in the righteousness that Jesus gives us. If we are tricked to do that, we are robbed of the joy and freedom of the Gospel.

If we still think that we need to worry about being good after we have heard the Father's verdicts: "You are my beloved child, with you I am well pleased!" we are back to square one, losing the gift of the wonderful exchange that Jesus gave us.

So... Don't worry about your goodness! You won't be good on your own! You can't be good on your own! You don't have to be good on your own! You are already very good because of what Jesus did. This is what we are reminded of in every Service and in every Bible study, every morning and every evening. You are very good!

Instead, let your joy and gratitude for what Jesus has done for you manifest itself in your service to others. Instead of wondering how you can be a better Christian, ask this: "How can my gracious Father use me with everything He has given to me in service to all those lovely and not so lovely people whom He has placed in my life?"

"How can I bless them and encourage them? How can I pass on Jesus' love and grace to them and be little Jesus for them? How can I proclaim them the freedom that we have in Christ and free them from the burden of trying to be good on our own? How can I remind them that they are very good already?"

These are the fruits the Lord is looking for. He doesn't need our self-improvement. He doesn't need our self-righteousness. All of that is futile. Trying to improve on what Jesus has already completed. But our God is looking for your fruits. That is not optional. We can't be lazy Christians. Remember the axe and fire for fruitless trees!

This is what our today's Gospel reading helps us to reflect on. Very important truths. We are sinfully red through and through. Jesus has dealt with it. Past, present, future. United with Him you are blameless, radiant and dear to your Father.

There is nothing else that we should do about that. It is finished. But now, it's time for active life, for abundant fruits for the sake of your neighbours. May the Spirit of God bless you and make you fruitful beyond your dreams and grant you much joy and satisfaction as you bear rich fruits for His glory. Amen.