

Matthew 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said:

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness;

‘Prepare the way of the Lord, Make his paths straight.’”

Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair and with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at 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 One who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry His sandals. 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 will gather His wheat into the granary; but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire.”

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection Questions

- 1) **Context:** Matthew begins this passage with the phrase, “In those days...” making a transition from the infancy narratives of Jesus and John into the onset of John’s ministry. This particular phrase reminds the reader that a special “kairos” moment (the realm of eternity breaking into and influencing events of our chronological time) has arrived. Matthew highlights these moments in a special way to alert the reader to the ‘kairos’ moments in history that will forever impact the lives of human beings in the time that follows. Matthew’s gospel gives us an historical context for John the Baptist as the one whom Isaiah prophesied (Chp. 40 vs 3). Why would this fact have been important to Matthew’s audience?

- 2) “John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea.” (vs. 1b,c). John was brought up by the Essene community (Jewish ritual purification community) in some of the most rugged and rough bad lands in the eastern part of Judah; a desert place infested with wild animals; a place where few humans would choose to live. John lived extremely simply (vs. 4), trusting that God would provide for his needs and therefore had time and energy to focus on preparing for the coming age. In his simplicity and prayer he was better able to hear the voice of the Lord. In what ways are there correlations between simplicity, healthy priorities and the capacity to hear God’s voice? Which aspects of John’s lifestyle might God want us to imitate so that we can hear Him better and therefore act according to His will for us?

- 3) Like John we are each called to give testimony to Christ’s work in our lives. How do we point others to Christ by the way we live, work, relate and speak?

- 4) The word “repent” here is “metanoia”; a change of heart that is reflected in changes in action; meaning to turn away from sin and to turn towards God. It implies (at times) a 180% turn from something bad towards something good. This could mean a radical break with one’s past so as to make room for a new future of following God. How are we, as Catholic Christians (who have access to the sacraments, to a prayer life and community life), particularly

empowered and equipped to undergo “metanoia” again and again and therefore follow Christ more closely?

- 5) The baptism that Christ offers us is qualitatively different from the one that John the Baptist offered. Christ baptizes us with the Holy Spirit and with fire. How does this baptism with the Holy Spirit and with fire lay the foundation for and empower you on a daily basis to walk with Christ as His disciple and apostle in this world? Why is it necessary for us to be empowered by the Holy Spirit to do the work that Christ has for us?
- 6) We might be surprised to see the Pharisees and Sadducees at John’s baptism (as his was a baptism of repentance) and those two groups would consider themselves righteous. They must have been very curious about this new prophet in order to subject themselves to this ritual. Literarily speaking, this is a perfect opportunity for Matthew to introduce the two groups that will become the greatest antagonists of Christ’s ministry. This is a moment of foreshadowing as well as awakening for all the disciples who are watching. In what ways do we relate to John’s disciples in this passage, (to John himself, and to the Pharisees and Saducees)?
- 7) John had some harsh words for the Pharisees and the Sadducees calling them a brood of vipers (snakes) who are fleeing from a spreading fire. As far as John is concerned their religious rituals are empty because they themselves have not shown the fruit that comes from a true repentance and a true relationship with God. The Pharisees and Sadducees mistakenly thought that their “card-carrying” status of being members of the Jewish people (while at the same time not bearing the fruit worthy of God’s call for them) would assure them a place in the kingdom. How does this dynamic get repeated in certain forms of “conveyor belt” Christianity? How can we make sure that we are not relying too heavily upon any type of “card-carrying” status (particularly as it relates to our faith lives) while neglecting the important works/fruits that are evidence of a call that is lived with integrity?