

Advent 2A 2019 SSP

Isaiah 11:1-10; Romans 15:4-13; St. Matthew 3:1-12

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

You don't see Christmas cards featuring John the Baptist. Today for example we hear John's message begin with Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Then he spots the Pharisees and Sadducees among the crowd and addresses them as a brood of vipers, casting doubt on the reality of their repentance. Finally, he speaks of his successor, Christ, for whom John was the herald and forerunner; and he dwells on the winnowing of the wheat to be gathered into the Lord's granary and separated from the chaff that will be burned with unquenchable fire. Merry Christmas.

Why does the Church do this, assigning readings about John the Baptist, on two of the Sundays before Christmas? Because, beautiful as it truly is, Christmas (remember it means Christ-Mass) is about the birth of Jesus Christ, the Messiah of Israel and Lord of the Gentiles, God incarnate, the Word made flesh who dwelt among us. He came to dwell among us not simply to join us and be our companion, but to save us from what is the matter with us. Or, as John the Baptist says elsewhere, Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Christmas is beautiful because it is Good News, the best news there is for every one of us: for God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God sent the Son into the world not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. At bottom, that is what Merry Christmas means.

Christmas is seriously Good News. It is not just superficially festive. So, John the Baptist is our wake-up call, our alarm bell. The most important thing he says, aside from Behold the

Lamb of God, is Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. If we listen to John, we see through the annual avalanche of commerce and sentiment at this season, into the mystery and the Good News of Christ's incarnation, and we hear a message to prepare ourselves. In the world we live in, and in the lives we lead, let's be honest, matters are so infected and influenced by sin, so overwhelmed by strife, so fallen and sad as a result, that the most creative thing we can do is start again. Repent means Stop, turn, begin again. Stop the "same old same old" of what you've been thinking, saying and doing. Turn toward a time of refreshing. Begin again with the Lord. Put another way, be reborn. This is a real spiritual possibility, in fact a necessity, a fresh start brought about through God's grace and our willingness.

John cast doubt on the Pharisees and Sadducees, the religious leaders, the clergy. He called them a brood of vipers. Why? Because of their inclination to rely on credentials. Do not presume to say, we are children of Abraham – for God can make children of Abraham from these stones. This doesn't mean that religious leaders, clergy, churchmen and churchwomen cannot repent and be saved; we need good religious leaders; it means that they have to watch out against being jaded or cynical or proud or envious, the occupational hazards of religious people who think they've seen it all.

The fact is, none of us has anywhere near seen it all. The kingdom of heaven is at hand, said John. Behold the Lamb of God, he later said, referring to Jesus. And when some of John's followers turned to Jesus and asked where he was staying, Jesus said Come and see. I have been a priest nearly fifty years. I first started wanting to come and see Jesus as a youth. I tell you, I have had glimpses and sightings of his glory and grace, as you have, but I haven't seen anything yet. Neither have you. That is why the message, Repent, for the kingdom is at hand, is always relevant, I would say urgent. Clear out the rubbish, get rid of the obstacles, look again with fresh

eyes. “Sir, we would see Jesus,” said some Greeks to a disciple. We have so much more to see. In fact, one of the key features of the kingdom of heaven, which we glimpse here and now, is called the Beatific Vision on the other side of death.

The role of John the Baptist is to prepare the way of the Lord. There is a sense in which in his person John summarizes all the prophets before him. Jesus would later on refer to John as “Elijah.” But John’s ministry only went so far. It went as far as repentance. He said so himself. “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 with fire.” Strong words.

One of the things John surely means, whether he himself knew it or not, is that when we repent and then turn to the Lord, when we come first to see Jesus, when we begin to put our faith in him, an exchange begins to take place between ourselves and Christ. We hand over our sins; the Lord hands over his grace. He lives the life we have not lived but can have as his gift. That is why the exchange, which you can literally see at the altar rail, has Christ turning over his body and blood, his sacred humanity, to us. It is an exchange involving soul and body. Look at how physical and realistic the language is. That Prayer of Humble Access which we say just before Communion, just after hearing the words, Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world; that very physical language is no church invention. It is from the lips of Jesus himself. “Except you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. My flesh is food indeed. My blood is drink indeed. The one who eats my flesh and drinks my blood dwells in me and I in him.”

God came down to make himself our very food and life. No wonder it is so necessary to repent and turn in order to receive him. That is the heart of Christmas.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.