

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

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!” For the crowds of people from Jerusalem and all Judea, the act of repenting meant being baptized by John and confessing their sins.

Now as you might expect, the work John is doing attracts the attention of the Pharisees and the Sadducees, the Jewish authorities. The Pharisees were rigorous in observing the Law, both the written Old Testament Law, and the oral traditions passed down through generations. They’ve come out to see what’s going on and to be baptized. They believed they were righteous because they obeyed the letter of the law, as it happens they didn’t understand or perhaps were ignorant of the intent of the law. They kept themselves apart from those who did not observe the Law and the oral traditions, as we will see later in the gospel of Matthew, they were highly critical of Jesus because he didn’t observe the Law or traditions the way the Pharisees thought should be done. Among other things the Pharisees believed in the resurrection of the body and in the coming of the Messiah.

The Sadducees were the priests in the temple, while Pharisees could be found all over Judea, Sadducees were primarily in Jerusalem. You might call them the religious aristocracy, coming from a long line of priests. They were the opposition party to the Pharisees, opposing the oral interpretations of the law and the oral traditions, believing only in the first five books of the OT. They also rejected the idea of resurrection from the dead as well as life after death.

Both the Pharisees and the Sadducees thought they were righteous, non-sinners, nothing to confess, no need for repentance, and more or less perfect in their observation of the law. But of all people they should have been the most receptive both to John’s message and to Jesus for whom John was preparing the way. John, doing exactly what he was destined by God to do from before his birth, sees the Pharisees and the Sadducees for what they are, and he responded accordingly. They, who should have been the shepherds of Israel instead lord it over the people piling on burdens, laws, regulations that no one could have followed.

Now John is totally focused on fulfilling his mission, to “prepare the way of the Lord...” The full quote from Isaiah is as follows:

“A voice cries out:
‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,

for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

Why is this important? Because in Isaiah 40 we see the purpose of the repentance John is calling for, is that the people of the Lord will be ready for the revealing of God's glory. Repentance was and is necessary because sin is very strong, it's really the desire to be like God, to be concerned for ourselves, our wants, and our perceived needs, and that desire is strong enough to keep us from the Lord's redemption, to keep us from accepting being found by the Good Shepherd.

And that's whom John is pointing to when he remarks about the "one who is more powerful than I is coming after me." John tells us he's not worthy to carry his sandals and that the one who is coming will baptize with "the Holy Spirit and fire." Jesus' baptism draws people, us, into the life of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. It gives new life that we may be immersed in the life of the Trinity, resisting whatever so-called life comes from the world around us, drawing us ever into the true life that streams from the Jesus' death and resurrection.

When I was a little boy my mom would tell me to go wash for supper or for bed. I learned quickly that even if I used a washcloth it would get the outmost layers of dirt off my hands, but it didn't really get to the lower levels of grime. Our sins are as obvious as dirt on a little boy's hands, but the worldly attitudes, the constantly reinforced self-absorption, that stimulates and encourages such things aren't so obvious. It was the same two thousand years ago as it is today, when John confronts with "Repent!" he's addressing the obvious dirt and grime and the attitudes that our lives should revolve around ourselves and our desires.

So how can we handle this? We can't. Jesus can and does, Christ crucified for you and me, Christ crucified handles the wrongs we've done and the attitudes that drive those same wrongs. Christ crucified slams into the perceived realities and the illusions that surround us and crushes them.

That's why I preach Christ crucified, resurrection and forgiveness, piercing the realities and illusions that surround us, and the attitudes that create them and buy into them. John's baptism was a baptism for repentance. The Son's baptism sets us firmly in the life of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. So during this time of Advent, we join with John the Baptizer in preparing the way for our Lord, confronting with Christ crucified the sin into which we are born and exist.

Through Word and Sacrament we are freed from the life of the world and the illusions that surround us, transformed, washed clean by the blood of the Lamb which sets us firmly in the life of the Trinity.

AMEN