

The Christ Revealed

In the name of Jesus, dear brothers and sisters in Christ: Reports of shepherds seeing angels near Bethlehem, telling them that the long expected Christ had been born. That odd pair of old folks at the Temple, Simeon and Anna, telling everyone who would listen how they had seen the infant Christ child with their own eyes. And let's not forget that group of eastern sages who showed up around the same time, claiming they'd read in the stars that a remarkable King of the Jews had been born. They came all the way from Babylon and beyond to pay their respects. And then they left mysteriously without reporting back to King Herod like he'd told them. How long has that been? Something on the order of thirty years ago now. Thirty years that these stories have had time to percolate through the collective consciousness of the Judean people. Thirty years for the seeds of these ideas planted back then to grow into an almost tangible expectation that something really big was about to happen.

Add to this the crushing weight and humiliation of the Roman occupation. Not a day goes by when the people of Judea don't feel the heavy boot of Rome on their necks, what with the taxes and soldiers and the foreign laws imposed upon them. It's a widely held belief that the Christ, when he comes, will be a deliverer; someone like Moses who freed Israel from slavery in Egypt, or like King David who overturned the scourge of the Philistines that Israel suffered under in his day. The people were longing for a savior like that. Oh yes, the time was ripe. They were ready for their Christ to be revealed.

And then suddenly appears on the stage this larger than life character John the Baptizer. He's like one of the prophets of old, a new Elijah. Everyone is aware of his strange appearance and extremely ascetic personal habits. He turns his back on all creature comforts and luxuries. The way he practices self-denial is legendary. He's recognized as truly a holy man. And his fiery preaching melts the hearts of even the most hardened sinners. It cuts you to the quick. And yet he draws the crowds by the thousands. They can't stay away. John's zeal for the Lord and his righteous ways is practically contagious.

Small wonder then that the people were whispering among themselves about whether this John just might be the one they were waiting for. He'd be about John's age. And there were those stories about his unusual birth ... something about a priest and an angel and a couple too old to have a child; kind of like Abraham and Sarah way back when. Yeah, it seemed to many that John might fit the bill.

John, for his part, is well aware what people are thinking. And so he makes a point of denying it repeatedly and often. "Nope, you've got the wrong guy. I am not the Christ. I merely call you to repent of your sins and baptize you with water to prepare you for his coming." And then he goes on to explain a few things more about the one they should be looking for.

First John says that he is mightier than I am. And that will soon become clear. John in his ministry performed no miracles. The ministry of Jesus from start to finish will be marked by miraculous signs of God's power working in and through him. He will demonstrate his mastery over the forces of nature, over demonic spirits, over bodily illnesses, injuries, and defects, and even over death.

Second John says that he is far holier than I am. People look at John and see a man obsessed with living a life set aside for the service of the Lord. The Pharisees were too, of course, and people looked up to them for it; but John takes it to different level entirely. He is the real deal. No one can hold a candle to him in terms of self-discipline and fervor for adhering to the Laws of the Lord. And yet John says of the Christ "I am not worthy to untie his sandals". It's an expression that may be lost on us, but John's hearers would have understood what he meant. You see, in that culture peoples' feet and anything that had to do with them were considered especially nasty. The same is true today throughout the Middle East. You may remember a few years back when visiting Iraq someone threw a shoe at then President Bush. For them it's the worst insult imaginable. There is nothing more offensive or degrading than coming into contact with another person's foot or footwear. So when John says he's not worthy to untie the sandals of the Christ, he's saying that on the holiness scale the Christ is orders of magnitude above me. He's saying, in effect, that the Christ is divine, that he is the Holy One of Israel.

The third thing John says of the Christ is that he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. John means that the baptizing he is doing is largely symbolic, that it only points ahead to a greater kind of baptizing that will be done by the Christ. The baptism of the Christ will have real power. It will deliver the Holy Spirit with his gifts. It will purify sinners like gold is purified by fire. John doesn't say how this is so, but in today's Epistle the Apostle Paul explains that Christian Baptism unites the baptized with Christ Jesus in his death, burial, and resurrection. In other words it's the cross and the atonement Jesus made there for sin that gives Christian Baptism its power to save.

And finally John says about the Christ that he will execute judgment. That's the meaning of the harvest imagery he borrows when he says, "His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." It's an especially appropriate image for him to use because the Jews back then knew that the Temple in Jerusalem stood on what had been a threshing floor, which was a flat outcropping of stone on the top of a hill. They'd bring the harvested wheat to such a place and spread the kernels on flat stone surface. Then they'd run a heavy sled back and forth over them to crack off the paper thin layer of indigestible chaff that surrounds each grain. The last step was to use a winnowing fork or shovel to throw the grains up into the air so that the wind would carry away the lighter chaff while the heavier grains would fall straight back down. The winnowed wheat was then ready for storage. Most of it would later be ground into flour to make bread, and some of it would be used as seed for next year's crop.

To explain the illustration, the Word of God goes forth from the Temple like seed. It grows in people to fruition and then comes back to the Temple in the form of a harvest of souls – souls that need cleansing from sin, which is what the Temple was all about: sacrifices and the shedding of blood to take away sin. And so the work of the Temple (and now of the Church) goes on year after year; repeated cycles of planting, harvesting, and winnowing. But at the end of the age there will be a final harvest. Then the separation won't be just sin from sinners, but also believers in Christ from unbelievers. The former will be received into the eternal joys of Paradise and the latter consigned to the unquenchable flames of hell.

To the people who were wondering if the Baptizer might be the Christ, then, John made it absolutely clear. I'm not the one. Don't look at me. Look to him who is in every way greater than I am. My ministry is about directing you to him. It bears saying that the ministry of the Church still is. My job, every pastor's job, is to direct you to Christ, to reveal him and his work to you through his Holy Word and Sacraments. Now, I don't think it's likely that anyone in the

church today would confuse their pastor with the Christ, certainly no one would make that mistake about me; but it is possible and it does happen that an unhealthy relationship develops between a pastor and the congregation he serves. It can happen, for example, when the pastor is viewed too highly by members of the congregation. The church then becomes something of a personality cult. People say things like, “Oh, Pastor, I don’t know what we’d do without you.” And it cuts both ways, because pastors have tremendous egos and like to hear compliments like that. But the fact of the matter is it’s Christ’s Church. It’s about him, not the pastor. And without one pastor, the Lord would simply give you another one; one with a different skill set, who has different strengths and weaknesses; but whose job is the same: to point you to Jesus, to reveal him to you in his Word and Sacraments.

John understood that. At the height of his popularity he said, “I must decrease so that he (the Christ) may increase.” And in today’s text we see it happen. According to the Lord’s plan and purpose, John is taken off center stage by King Herod who puts him in prison.

And then, it what seems to be almost an afterthought, St. Luke adds that Jesus was baptized too. It’s like the Evangelist is deliberately hiding Jesus among the crowds of sinners coming to John for Baptism. Where John stands out bold and bigger than life, Jesus looks pretty much like everyone else; which is the point: there is nothing impressive about Jesus’ appearance. You can’t see by looking at him all that’s going on there. It has to be revealed to you. And it is revealed in today’s text by the Word of the Father and the Holy Spirit in the moment when Jesus is baptized. It’s in his baptism that the heavens are opened and the Christ is revealed.

The same is true today. We wouldn’t know Jesus or his saving work for us without the spoken Word of the Father and the Holy Spirit given to us when we were united with Christ in Baptism. In that simple ceremony that didn’t look like much – just a man baptizing with water – Jesus did great things for you. He baptized you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. He opened your eyes to see him for who he is: your Lord and Savior. And he opened the way to heaven to you by washing away your sins.

And now through the ongoing ministry of his Church he keeps you with Jesus Christ in the one true faith as together we wait in eager expectation for his final coming when once again, the Christ will be revealed – this time in all his glory. May the Lord be merciful to us and hasten that day. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!