

A FRAMEWORK FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION (Mt 3:1-12)

- Matthew presents Jesus to Jewish readers as the Messiah

v.1.

- Jesus is 29 years old.
- ‘John’ = Yahweh has been gracious, is the ‘Baptist’, ‘John the Baptiser’
- While baptizing was distinctive of John and thus gave him the added name, his work in general was that of a prophet. More specifically, a herald sent to the Jewish nation.
- When we translate the word ‘preaching’, the original meaning of the word must be retained.
Preaching, in the Biblical sense, is merely to announce clearly and distinctly exactly what God orders us to announce his Word.
- We dare not change that message by alteration, by omission, by addition.
- The preacher is not to utter his own eloquent wisdom but is to confine himself to the foolishness and the scandal of the Gospel.

- He acts in the valley of Jordan. The most probable site is the northern ford near Succoth, the same by which Jacob crossed over from Mahanaim.
- The region is called a desert as it has never been inhabited, except later by ascetics like the Essenes and the hermits who sought seclusion here.
- John worked in obedience to an immediate call from God.
- Moreover, John was born as a member of the Jewish tribe to whom priestly functions belonged, and thus no Jew questioned his authority to perform such actions.

v.2.

- Matthew presents us only with the essentials which the Baptist announced.
- “**be repenting**” → is one of the most important word of the NT, the Hebrew *nicham*, ‘repent by changing the mind’, and *schub*, ‘to turn’ or to be converted.
- The Greek word, *metanoia* originally means ‘to perceive or see afterward’, i.e, when I is too late: ‘to change one’s mind’ and thus to ‘regret’ and ‘to repent’.
- The Scriptural use of the term added a spiritual depth that is far beyond the thought of secular writers. → **it signifies the religious change of the heart which turns from sin and guilt to cleansing and forgiveness by God’s grace.** [! the damaging and burdening feeling of guilt, if it is exaggerated, we should turn away from!]
- Metanoia = looks both backward toward the regretted sin and forward to the accepted pardon
- ‘be repenting’ = the present tense indicates a state or condition, one befitting the day of the Messiah, thus a life lived in repentance.
- John’s call for conversion required faith in the Messiah, just as the apostles proclaimed conversion to Jesus. → Jn 1:18: *‘The same came for a witness to the Light, that all men through him might believe’*
- John is not simply an OT prophet < his work is part of the life of the Gospel, Luke calls his message as ‘preaching the Gospel’ (Lk 3:18)
- Luther calls the Baptist ‘the fiery angel of St John, the true preacher of repentance.’

- **The reason for repentance is: ‘for the Kingdom of Heavens has come near’.**

- It is a kingdom whose very nature is that of heaven. It is the kingdom that God rules.
- Heavens, *schamayim* (Hebrew)
- Earthly kingdoms have only subjects < In God’s kingdom we are also **partakers!**
- Even more, we are not simply partakers and subjects in this kingdom, but in God’s Kingdom we already now bear the title ‘kings unto God’, and eventually the kingdom shall consist of nothing

but kings in glorious array, each with his crown, and Christ thus ‘the Kings of kings’, a kingdom made up entirely of kings with no subjects at all!

– All that is in the world, even every hostile force, is subservient to the plans of God. However, the children and sons of God, as heirs of the kingdom, in whom God’s grace is displayed, constitute kingdom in its specific sense.

– This kingdom is divided by the coming of Christ. Hence we have the kingdom before Christ, looking toward his coming, and the **kingdom after Christ**, looking back to his coming the kingdom as it was in Israel, as it now is in the Christian church, the *Una Sancta* in all the world.

• The Baptist says “the kingdom has come near” = Jesus was approaching, and by the revelation of himself with power and grace as the Messiah and by the completion of his redemptive work **he would stand forth as the King of Salvation from heaven. He would by faith enter into the hearts of men, making them partakers of the Kingdom.**

– Since the kingdom is so near in Christ, the King, all men should long to receive this kingdom. The one and only way to do this is to repent, to turn from sin, self-righteousness, and worldly security by the power of grace in the Baptist’s Word and Sacrament. This is a turning to the king and his kingdom with pardon, peace, and joy.

v.3.

• The ‘wilderness’ in Isaiah, originally it meant two things. The Lord came to Egypt through the Arabian (southern) desert to bring his people into Canaan; or it meant the great desert between Babylon, where Israel was held in exile. This wilderness was necessary. < This desert, however is used figuratively. It denotes the **hindrances and obstacles which separate the people from God.**

• The wilderness with its obstructions in Isaiah is found in the hearts of the people: here the Lord’s way is to be prepared.

– In Isaiah 40:3, mountains and hills are to be levelled. To make a way through them is a task that is utterly beyond human power. That is exactly the impression to be made on the readers and on hearers. Strictly speaking, only the Lord himself can construct a way through such obstacles. When he orders us to build this way, the obvious sense is that we can do it only **by the grace which the Lord himself bestows.** That is why the Baptist cried: ‘Repent!’ Impenitence raises the mountains of obstruction. Repentance opens the way for the Lord. And true repentance is wrought by the Lord’s own law and gospel in which his power and grace are active.

– Luther writes: ‘Such preparation is spiritual, it consists in the deep conviction and confession that you are unfit, a sinner, a poor, damned and miserable with all the works that you are able to do. Where this conviction is wrought, the heart will be opened for the Lord’s entrance with his forgiveness and gifts.’

v.4.

• Living and working in the wilderness, he dressed and ate accordingly.

– His appearance was a stern sermon... → It was a call to all those who made food and drink, house and raiment their chief concern in life to turn from such vanity.

– He was a living illustration of how little man really needs here below – something we are prone to forget!

– And by drawing people out into the wilderness John made them share a bit of his own austere life. Men left their mansions, offices, shops.... And for a time at least gave their thoughts to higher things.