

Gaudete

15 December, Anno Domini 2019

St. Matthew 11:2-11

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In the Name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

You can certainly understand why the one who was preaching about axes and winnowing forks and baptizing with fire and the Holy Spirit might have been a little confused by Jesus. Jesus probably seemed a little anti-climactic after eating locusts and wearing camel's hair clothing. Jesus didn't really seem to be a firebrand going around turning everything upside down like you might have expected after listening to John (though there was that incident with the money changers in the temple). There wasn't anything grand or fantastic about the carpenter from Nazareth. Instead, Jesus seemed pretty ordinary and humble. John may have been wondering if he had been preaching the wrong thing, if maybe he had been preparing people the wrong way and for the wrong kind of Christ. Maybe John shouldn't have gone around calling people broods of vipers and telling the king that he was living in an adulterous marriage with his brother's wife.

But John did have it right. Jesus was the Christ, the anointed one whom we are to look for. The Father had clearly declared so after John baptized his cousin. The Holy Spirit visibly descended upon Jesus, as had been revealed to John, and the Father Himself spoke declaring Jesus to be His beloved Son with whom He was well-pleased. But Jesus wasn't a bull sent into a china shop to tear everything up and send lightning bolts, fire, and brimstone in order to give everyone what they deserved. The Savior was here, wrapped in human flesh, to save, not to destroy. The eternal punishment of the sinner was not the purpose of the incarnation. That is not God's will. God clearly declares that His will is that all men be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. Those who suffer damnation will do so only because they reject the gift God gives in Christ. Zechariah said it best in the Benedictus as he addressed John's role in salvation. He sang "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God..."

Zechariah understood that the mightiest of the works of God is forgiveness, counting the sins of the world against His own dear Son rather than against the guilty sinner. Such tender mercy of God cannot ever be appreciated nearly enough. And this is exactly what John was to proclaim, and had proclaimed. The

Christ is first and foremost a forgiver of sins and a destroyer of death. That is what Jesus was anointed to do. He came as the enfleshed mercy of God to be the Lamb of atonement upon whom the sins of the whole world were laid. He did not come to exact vengeance but to win and distribute salvation to all who take seriously God's judgment against sin and hunger for God's mercy that they might be spared the punishment we all deserve. God's mercy stands at the center of the works that Jesus points to, the very works of the Christ that God foretold through the prophet Isaiah.

Like the prophets before him, John did his job faithfully, even though he himself suffered doubt at times. And we shouldn't be surprised or disturbed by that. John was a sinner like the rest of us. His office didn't confer upon him some kind of superhuman status. The Baptizer pointed sinners to the Savior that he himself needed. And as a sinner, the ways and the wisdom of God quite often defy his reason and didn't line up with his own experience or his expectations of the kind of Christ that we need. John needed to hear the voice and the promises of Christ just as much as you and I do. And if the forerunner was not so strong of faith that he didn't need to continually hear Christ's sermon, can any of us claim that we can go without? And isn't it interesting that Jesus didn't rush to John's prison cell Himself? He did what God has always done - He sent messengers to bear the good news that captive John had been granted liberty from death and hell.

He does the same for you. The Lord sends you pastors to visit you in your own prison, whatever shape it may be, and tell you again and again and again what He told those first witnesses to report - through Jesus the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. Maybe those words seem empty or less than helpful...at first. But to those who will hear them in faith, who won't be offended by the humility of the Christ, that short sermon contains news of immeasurable magnitude that is able to send consciences filled with dread soaring into the highest heaven. These works of Jesus declare that death itself is being overthrown, that the sin which weighs us down and leaves us in terror is finally and forever being dealt with.

This is what Jesus authorizes and commands His called and ordained servants to preach because that is what every sinner needs to hear. It doesn't matter how sin has reached in and harmed them. It doesn't matter what language they speak, what culture they come from, what neighborhood they live in. This is the good news that is for all people - the Christ of God has come to roll back the cloud of sin and death that hangs over everyone born of women, even John the Baptist. If there

were something more or better that Christ could proclaim to you He absolutely would. But He hasn't because there isn't. And if He preaches it we NEED to hear it. Not once as though we've learned the facts and have become masters with nothing more to gain. Those who treat the proclamation of Christ that way declare their disdain for it and tempt God to take it away from them completely. But we need to hear the holy Law of God and the life-giving Gospel throughout our lives as often as it is made available to us just like Elijah and just like John. Sin and death and temptation surround us on every side, every day. We need Christ to come and preach us out of our prisons and protect us from the devil's endless attacks. You will be done needing to hear the Gospel when you are wearing the crown of eternal life. Until then, you can't live without it.

And we should expect and demand nothing less from the pastors whom the Lord gives to us. As poor, unworthy sinners, filled with doubts like John, pastors are appointed by Jesus through His Church to be stewards of the Christ. They bear His word and distribute His gifts just exactly as He has given them. They are not free to tell you something else, to change the message to make it less scandalous, to dull the axe so that it doesn't cut so deeply, or to preach a different Gospel so that it's not quite so offensive. They are not free to give you different gifts or to try to come up with better gifts because only the gifts that Christ Himself has given bear with them the promise of the forgiveness of sins and everlasting life. Pastors will answer to their Lord on the basis of their faithfulness to the Word He gave them to preach just as the prophets and the apostles before them. That is why your pastors need your daily prayers. Like you they are tempted on every side, particularly to preach something more palatable and pleasing, to change the message for the purpose of filling the pews and the offering plates. If a pastor tries to deliver a different message or give different gifts then he is a faithless servant who is to be rejected and driven out because he is stealing salvation from all who listen to him.

Most certainly, what Christ's Church preaches is foolishness if you are looking for a Christ who will make you happy and stroke your ego. Those who are impressed by strength and power and wisdom will be sorely disappointed and offended by what Christ's faithful stewards deliver because they deliver to you the humble Christ who comes for the blind, the lame, the poor, the weak, the murderer, the thief, the addict, and the prostitute. He comes for the depressed, the anxious, and the overwhelmed. He comes to set free those who taste the bitterness of their sin and remain locked in the devil's prison.

But if you will be counted among the poor sinners then the Lord Jesus Christ has good news for you. He has come to set you free and to give you eternal life. He,

the Christ of God, has born your sin and God's wrath in His own Body so that your death might be swallowed up by His death. And in His resurrection you have the promise that every affliction that now presses on you in mind, body, or spirit will be taken from you in the resurrection on the Last Day and you will be forever free, filled to overflowing with comfort and joy. And this day your Lord gives you a foretaste of what awaits His dear children - the feast of victory given in His Body and Blood in the Holy Communion.

Rejoice because God has sent to you His messengers to proclaim to you the salvation which He has prepared for you in the Lord Jesus Christ.

In the Name of +Jesus.