

Gaudete, The Third Sunday in Advent, A ✕ D 2008

Matthew 11:2-11 Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples³ and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?"⁴ And Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see:⁵ 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.⁶ And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."⁷ As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind?⁸ What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses.⁹ What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.¹⁰ This is he of whom it is written, "' Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.'" ¹¹ Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

In the name of the Father and of the ✕ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

1 From prison, John the Baptist sent his disciples to Jesus to ask, "Are you the Christ who is to come, or shall we look for another?" From prison? Why was John, the one of whom the Lord declared, "among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist," in prison? For preaching.

2 John's preaching knew no boundaries, no sin that was not in need of being exposed, no sinner who was off-limits to his scathing accusations. He called the Pharisees, the religious leaders of the day, a "brood of vipers" for their refusal to bear fruit in keeping with repentance. He warned the tax collectors about their extortionist practices. He accused the Roman soldiers of similar extortion, of making threats and false accusations. But none of these things landed John in prison. Not until John turned his attention to King Herod did things get precarious. But John had no choice. As a prophet of the Word of God and a forerunner of the Christ, John could do nothing but proclaim God's Word and prepare people for the coming of the Christ. So when John aimed the accusation of God's Word against Herod for seducing and marrying Herodias, the wife of his brother, Herod threw John in prison.

3 What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? No, John was no swaying reed, able to change the tenor of his preaching with the breeze of the times. A man dressed in soft clothing, living in king's houses? No, John was no preacher to scratch your itching ears and tell you what you wanted to hear. Instead, he'd give you what you needed to hear. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, said Jesus, and more than a prophet.

4 But this prophet of prophets, the last ever to hold the office of the prophets, probably knew in prison that his time was at an end. His preaching would cost him a lot more than his freedom; it would cost him his head. When the daughter of Herodias danced for her step-father Herod, she convinced him to give her

anything she'd ask for. So she asked for the head of John the Baptist on a platter. As the last event recorded in the history of his life, John the Baptist send his disciples to Jesus to inquire whether He was the Christ. Maybe John was genuinely in doubt, which is not the opposite of faith, and wanted the same Gospel of comfort proclaimed to him. Or, perhaps John wanted his disciples to have the same faith in this Jesus as he had.

5 Jesus answered: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: 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. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me." Blessed are those not offended by Jesus. There are only two reactions to Jesus: the "amen" of faith or the offense of unbelief.

6 And Jesus knows just how offensive He is. Down to His very Incarnation, Jesus is offensive. That God would don human flesh and be born isn't too offensive. But that He was given a name that means He will save His people from their sins is offensive. If you don't acknowledge that you're hopelessly trapped in your own sinfulness, you can only have a happy holidays, not a merry Christmas. Christmas is for sinners in need of saving, and that's offensive. Advent, too. The idea of a season in which you are to fast, give-alms to the poor, and spend your days in prayer and humble repentance, well, that's more than a little wacky. The proclamation that the same Jesus who was born in humble surroundings will return in power and great glory to judge all mankind, yes, that's offensive, too.

7 No wonder John's preaching to prepare the way before the coming of the Christ was offensive. And men are still offended when told to repent, when told not to steal or gain through dishonest means, when warned about not taking care of a neighbor's physical needs, when told they ought not divorce or entice the neighbor's wife. God's Law is offensive. It calls you a sinner. It calls the things you enjoy doing sins. It tells you you cannot love both your sins and the Savior. And it tells you that unless you turn from those things, you'll languish eternally in hell. Offensive? You bet. That offensive preaching cost John his head, but as a prophet of the Word, He had no choice. It may cost preachers today their salaries, members of their congregation, their cushy retirement packages, but they likewise have no choice. As preachers of the Word, they are bound to that Word. Offensive? Certainly. The Law will either offend you or kill you. Blessed is he who is not offended. Repent.

8 All of that offensiveness pales in comparison to the offense of the cross. That the Nativity of God happened specifically so that God could bear the sins of the world and suffer the punishment of death because

of them, that's offensive. That God would save you apart from any merit or worthiness in you, simply because of the shed blood of Jesus on the cross, is offensive. That He would deliver the forgiveness of sins to you completely by himself, without any input or assistance from you, is offensive. That God would die for sinners, is offensive. That God the Son fulfilled the Law of God with its holy standard of perfection and yet died condemned by the Law is offensive. That He would give to you His perfection and take away your sinfulness is offensive. This is the good news preached to the poor, to you. He is the Christ; do not look for another. Blessed is he who is not offended but who instead receives the Lord's gift of faith.

9 The mysteries through which the Lord delivers faith and the forgiveness of sins are still offensive to our sensibilities. Blessed is he who is not offended by the Lord. Jesus promises to make disciples through Holy Baptism and to deliver the forgiveness of sins through ordinary water. John the Baptist was esteemed by the Lord as the greatest of everyone born of woman, but the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than even the Baptist. So are you, born of water and the Spirit. Blessed is He who is not offended that God would stoop to such lowly means but who in faith says, "Amen." Jesus promises to deliver His forgiveness through the mouths of men, sending them with the Holy Spirit, making them stewards of these mysteries. Blessed is He who is not offended that God would place sinful men into a holy office to deliver His very forgiveness. Jesus promises to deliver His very Body joined to ordinary bread and His true Blood joined to ordinary wine. These He places into your mouth for the forgiveness of sins. Blessed is He who is not offended but who receives Him in faith.

In the name of the Father and of the ☩ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria
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