

The Greatest and Least

In the name of him whose truth sets us free, dear friends in Christ: This morning's Gospel lesson reminds us that a whole lot can change in a short amount of time. In our worship last Sunday we heard from John the Baptist at the very peak of his desert ministry. People were coming to the Jordan in droves from all over Judea and beyond to hear this strange prophet who had suddenly appeared. They had heard about his rejection of the comforts of civilization, his eccentric ideas about personal hygiene and fashion, and his even more peculiar diet of grasshoppers and wild honey, so I'm certain that part of their interest in John was freakish curiosity; but mostly they were drawn to the arid wilderness by the power of his message. And that's remarkable because John's preaching style was not what you'd call gentle and inviting. No, he was very loud, abrasive, and "in-your-face". His preaching was not unlike what some over the top hawkish individuals believe should be the US strategy in Iraq: namely, "Nuke them all and let God sort them out". John pulled no punches. He didn't care who might be offended by what he said. He lumped everyone together and blazed away with the full force and fury of God's Law. His intended target was *all* people: from slaves to kings on the social scale, men and women, rich and poor, from the most pious and upright Pharisee to the worst of the public sinners, from *the greatest to the least*; John's goal was to fill them all with the fear of God and the terror of his righteous judgments against sin. And John was very good at it. When he preached, his listeners knew that they were hearing the powerful truth of God. And hearing it, they felt the heat of perdition's flames and they trembled with fear.

But now, in this morning's lesson, it's a very different John that we find. Gone are his fire and conviction. Now he is weak and wavering. His confidence is shattered. Where once he had pointed to Jesus and said with absolute certainty, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world", now he wonders if maybe he'd been wrong.

So, what happened? What so stumbled the faith of this mighty prophet of God? Well, we heard last week that John was put into prison by King Herod Antipas. The king took exception to John accusing him publicly of adultery because he had run off with the wife of his half-brother, Philip. Oh, the charges were true; it's just that Herod didn't like hearing it. He also didn't like what John's very vocal accusations were doing to his already doubtful reputation. So to silence John, he put him in not just any prison, but the very worst hellhole he could find: the dark, hot, dungeon of the fortress of Machaerus. Perched on the desolate eastern shore of the Dead Sea, it was a frightful place. This is where Herod warehoused the worst criminals and the most troublesome of his enemies. To be sent there was just about the same as a death sentence; but to be fair, Herod didn't want to kill John. The fact is that he had a grudging respect for him; but until John stopped publicly accusing him of living in sin, he was going to stay at Machaerus. Herod hoped the unpleasant lodgings might encourage John to tone down his rhetoric and keep his moral judgments to himself. But John wasn't budging. He was no "reed shaken by the wind". John was God's unbending prophet sent to declare his Law. For him there was no such thing as compromise when it came to the Commands of God.

Besides, he had counted on Jesus; that he would soon be ushering in the Kingdom of Righteousness that he himself had been paving the way for. He saw himself as a sort of a blocker, running ahead of Jesus who, he imagined, would carry the ball into the end zone and score the touch down. Preaching about Jesus, John had said "I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming ... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff to burn with unquenchable fire." That is to say, John saw Jesus as coming in wrath and judgment. His thought was, "You think I'm tough on sin? Just wait'll you see what's coming: I'm a tall glass of cold water compared to the flames he will bring on you. When he comes the wicked will be swept away, the captives will be set free, and justice will fill the land. When he establishes his kingdom, the righteous will live in peace and prosperity."

And in an absolute sense, John was right: one day Jesus *is* going to do all those things, and we look forward to it. But in his first coming he had another mission to perform. It was a mission that John had either overlooked or that he didn't quite understand – and no surprise there, because most people didn't understand what Jesus' first mission was to be about.

But because of this misunderstanding, to John, rotting in his dungeon cell for many months now, it seemed that Jesus was doing everything wrong. John was well informed by his disciples who kept tabs on what Jesus was doing and reported back to him. And what he was hearing didn't seem to make much sense. Where John had scorched notorious public sinners with threats of damnation, Jesus embraced them and sat at their tables to break bread. And then the next day, John had heard, Jesus would be just as likely to visit the home of one of the self-righteous Pharisees – the kind of people upon whom John had heaped the hottest of his verbal cinders. It was incomprehensible. It almost seemed like Jesus was making every effort to undo the preparatory work that he had done. Meanwhile the wicked were still going unpunished, the poor and needy were still being oppressed, and all kinds of lawlessness and injustice were being allowed to continue. And the worst of it was that John knew that one of the things that Jesus had come to do was to set the captives free – that's what the Scriptures promised. "Well, here I am a captive! I'm in chains for doing the right thing, for what God called me to do. I've been unjustly imprisoned by wicked men. When are you going to set *me* free?"

John simply couldn't understand. And we are at times subject to the same kind of misunderstanding. In this world we want justice now. We hate seeing the wicked go unpunished and people getting away with corruption and all kinds of evil crimes. We don't understand why the Lord allows bad things to happen to decent people, and why he permits poverty and ignorance and prejudice and every other social ill you can name to continue unchecked and to grow worse each day. We especially don't understand why God allows bad to happen to us. When illness or misfortune strike, or when we suffer in some way for doing what's right we want to know, "Lord, why are you allowing this? I'm on your side. Why aren't you taking better care of me? Why aren't you defending me?"

We find the answer in Jesus' response to John. "Go tell him what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them." In short, the message is that right now Jesus is not here to judge; but to heal and to restore. His mission now is one of mercy and forgiveness. Jesus tells John, "I'm here to fix things starting with what is most broken: namely the human problem with sin." John's job was to make people feel that problem. He was to show them how sin had left them spiritually blind and lame – incapable of doing what God demands. John was to show them how they were in fact dead in sin. He was to load them with the weight of sin's chains; he was to make them feel the heat and oppression – precisely so that they would go to Jesus to be set free.

And that's exactly what was happening. Sure Jesus was healing people from their physical ailments as well. But he did that primarily to illustrate what was going on inside of people who were coming to him; inside where things can't be seen, in their souls, where they were receiving the healing and life-giving words of God's forgiveness.

Where John had miscalculated (if indeed he had) was with the assumption that if terrifying sinners with a little hellfire and brimstone is a good thing, if that gets them to straighten up and fly right, well, then a lot more of the same must be even better. But it's not. No, the Law of God can only show us what's wrong with us. It has no power to fix what's wrong. Those who are spiritually blind, lame, leprous, and dead cannot restore themselves. But having discovered that's the condition they're in, they can go to the One to whom John was pointing, the One mightier than John – not for a heavier dose of law – but for the healing forgiveness and mercy they need.

And while this time of God's grace in Jesus goes on, there will be injustice in the world. There has to be precisely because during this time God isn't treating sinners as they deserve. That's good news for us because we don't want him treating us as we deserve – but with it comes the consequence that at times life will be unfair: the wicked will prosper, the righteous will suffer, and all kinds of social evils will

continue. They'll continue until the last repentant soul comes to the Lord Jesus Christ and day of grace comes to its end.

Interestingly enough, nothing illustrates the spiritual truths we've been considering this morning quite so well as the life of John the Baptist. His behavior and appearance are intended to be something of a living parable. What I mean is this: he turned his back on the world's creature comforts; he lived in the desert, wore rough, scratchy clothing, and ate bugs and foul-tasting wild honey. Why? It was all meant to be an illustration of what the Law of God is to do to you. It's to make you miserable, hot, hungry, thirsty, and uncomfortable. So not only did John preach the message of God's Law, he actually played the part. And the circumstance we find him in this morning's text is where a life under the Law eventually leads: to despair and doubt in a desert dungeon outside of the Promised Land. And this is important: Jesus calls John the greatest of those born of women. What he means is that no one came closer than John to leading a perfectly righteous and godly life. John was the best of the best. And just look what all that Law he lived by got him: absolutely nowhere. You see, John himself has been brought to the point his preaching was intended to bring everyone else: to feeling hopelessly weak and helpless. And the fact that he, the greatest of those born of women, finds himself in that situation highlights the truth that there is no one righteous; no, not one. The Law convicts us all – even the greatest man who ever lived.

Fortunately, Jesus goes on to say that the least person in the Kingdom of God is greater than John. That is to say that the least person in the Kingdom is even more righteous. Why is that? It's because those in the Kingdom are those who have faith in Jesus. They have come to him for forgiveness. And trusting in him, they are credited with his holy perfection. They are in the eyes of God truly sinless – no matter how soiled and stained with sin their lives have been. And there could be something of a double meaning here in Jesus' words. When Jesus speaks of the least in the Kingdom of God, he may also be referring to himself. Because by taking our sins upon himself and dying upon the cross, Jesus became the least and the servant of all in God's Kingdom.

In any case, we see that Jesus did not leave John in his prison of doubt and despair. By sending the message he did, he encouraged John to see that everything was indeed proceeding according to God's plan, even if parts of it were beyond his understanding. And I am certain that John took comfort in these words and placed his trust in Jesus despite his outward circumstances. His body may have remained in chains; but trusting in Jesus his soul was set free. I'm just as certain that he continued to trust in Jesus until the end when he faced the executioner's blade. Then, not coincidentally, his own wrongful death for proclaiming the truth served as foreshadowing of his Lord's innocent death for our sin.

All of which should serve as reminder for us that God's wisdom is wiser than the wisdom of men. And because we have listened to John's dirge and so been brought to mourning over our sins, and have subsequently listened to the joyful flute of Christ's Gospel whereby we dance into his Kingdom by faith, we know that we too can be confident that Jesus knows what he is doing with us at all times. We know that in the face of injustice or mistreatment, or whatever ills befall us, that we can place our complete hope and confidence in him even when we don't understand what he's doing. And we can remain confident even in adversity and the hour of death because it is especially at such times that the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guards our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!