

Mark 1:1-8

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight".

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'

Religion is a two edged sword. It can bring light or cast a shadow.

Religion starts to cast a shadow when at its center is the belief that if you do this or that action and God will love you. When this happens religion becomes more of an obstacle course rather than a means of inner transformation.

This was the problem Luther and his associates were trying to fix during the Reformation of the 16th century.

The problem of religion's shadow was addressed today with John the Baptist in the Gospel I just read, but in order to understand it, we must also understand a little of the history of John.

John the Baptist came from the priestly class and his father Zachariah was a temple priest. During that time, a priest was someone whose responsibilities included offering animal sacrifices and taking care of the Temple. One of their duties was to make sure that incense was burning before the tabernacle. When we meet Zachariah in the first chapter of Luke, he is offering incense. In Luke's Gospel we read:

"In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly class. His wife was a descendant of Aaron (another priest), and her name was Elizabeth. Once when he was serving as priest before God he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense."

Notice that John the Baptist did not follow his father Zachariah who took care of the temple, offered sacrifices or doing other things that priests normally did.

Rather than work in the temple, which was considered by the establishment to be the primary place where religious activities occurred, John went into the desert, which was believed to be a place of temptation and evil. Remember that according to the scriptures, Jesus also went into the desert where he experienced temptation. The desert is something both John and Jesus had in common.

Some bible scholars believe that John the Baptist was a mentor of Jesus. Perhaps Jesus spent some of his time in the desert with the Baptist. In today's Gospel we read that John proclaimed: "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

It was about this time that Jesus' public ministry began, but it wasn't until after he was baptized by John. It wasn't long after he began his ministry that he heard the news that John was beheaded in prison.

In two or three years Jesus would come to a similar end, although it would be by crucifixion. Both John and Jesus would die because they challenged religious authorities who were all about Jewish purity codes and performing proper religious activities in the temple. There were about 625 religious laws people were suppose to follow. Talk about an obstacle course.

So in today's Gospel we see John, not in the Temple like his father Zachariah was, but down by the Jordon River baptizing people and proclaiming they were forgiven their sins. Normally forgiveness of sins was found in the Temple with the sacrifice of animals and other activities and that's what occupied the life of his father. However, John bypasses all that. He abandoned the religious system of his father and simply called for a new way of relating to God. Jesus would continue John's tradition in his ministry.

In effect, John proclaimed to the religious authorities of his day that they were creating too many obstacles for people to relate with God. He goes into the desert and says you can experience god here. God's love is available and is as plentiful as the water in the Jordan River.

He speaks to people on the edge of the Empire, those on the margins of society away from the Temple.

His clothing reflects this – camel’s hair. It is not the proper clothing of religion but is the clothing of poverty. He became like many of the people he baptized, which contributed to his success. Rather than gathering at the temple, they were gathering together along the Jordan River with John. Later they would gather with Jesus and would find new life with him outside the temple system.

John is not eating at 5 star restaurants but is eating locust and wild honey, food that is close to the earth and simple. He was not eating like a priest or dressed like a temple priest. Rather, he identified with the poor and marginalized.

These activities of the Baptist were subversive and undermined the temple system.

Jesus’ actions were also anti-temple. Remember, he said: “Destroy this temple and in three days it will rise. – He was referring to the temple of his body, which is where his followers would find forgiveness, mercy, compassion and new life. He taught that God’s presence is not confined to the temple.

This is seen too in his cleansing of the temple, which occurred shortly before he was crucified. This anti-temple activity was especially seen when he died on the cross and the curtain between the people and the holy of holies where the tabernacle was kept was torn in two. Now, God is on the loose and not controlled by any religious system.

As we commemorate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, we need to remember that taking way obstacles to God is what it was all about.

John announced two kinds of baptism. One is the baptism he was doing, with water, which is something we have all been through. It is ritualized and churchified. It is a predictable and domesticated.

He said that there is a 2nd baptism and that’s the one that really matters. And that is the baptism of Jesus. He called it a baptism of fire. Fire is not something easily controlled.

So, we know what it is to be dipped into water and baptized, but how many of us have been dipped into Jesus Christ?

The baptism of Jesus involves an inner awakening. An inner knowledge of infinite love. Once you know that, your life changes. The human ego is booted off the pedestal and religion is replaced with a relationship. This dynamic was seen in John the Baptist, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and in the 16th century reformation.

One author remembers a time when visiting a monastery a couple of weeks before Christmas. As she passed a monk walking outside, she greeted him with, "Merry Christmas." The monk's response caught her off guard a bit. He said: "May Christ be born in you."

His words seemed strange at the time. What did he mean, "May Christ be born in you?" At the time she was unsure of what he meant, but now all these years later, sitting beside the Christmas tree, she felt the impact of his words. She discovered that Advent is a time of spiritual preparation. It is also a time of transformation. It is "discovering our soul and letting Christ be born from the waiting heart."

Amen.