

## **Are we that bad?!**

Repent for the Kingdom of heaven has come near! - John the Baptist - Matt.3:1-12

### **Prayer**

#### **Intro**

On a certain day a lawyer, a doctor, and a preacher, the three important men of small town went out for a shooting trip. Just for a time of fun and bonding. They had asked a local ranger to guide and instruct them. This man gave them each a gun, instructed them how to use it, and guided them into the forest to a good spot where they could wait for some deer to pass by.

They waited, and waited, and yes, there came a deer passing by. The ranger signed to the 3 men to have their guns ready, and then nodded to shoot. Pang, pang, pang, three shots were heard and the poor deer fell, killed at once.

The men hurried over to the animal, and congratulated each other with their trofee. After talking a while about their experience they asked the ranger: “We have shot the deer, but with your expertise, can you tell us whose shot of us killed it?”

The ranger inspected the deer from all sides and all angles, and then with certainty said: “It was the shot of the preacher!” “How did you come to that conclusion?” the men asked with curiosity. “Well”, the ranger said, “the shot went in one ear, and out the other. That's the shot of a preacher!”

### **The preaching of John the Baptist was not like that.**

He travelled all over the region between the Jordan and Jersualem with a simple meassage: “Repent for the Kingdom of heaven has come near!” All the people came out to hear him preach.

His words didn't go in one ear and out the other. John's words reached their hearts and moved them to repent. The people wanted to be baptized for the forgiveness of their sins. They wanted to be ready to welcome the promised King. The King they were expecting was promised throughout the OT. Not just a son of David, but the Son of David, the long awaited Messiah, Saviour, One who would deliver from oppression, who would bring justice and blessing. Psalm 72 which we read this morning points to this King as well.

### **Who were all these people?**

They were people from all layers of society. Ordinary people from Jerusalem and Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. City people, village people, and country people, rich and poor, people from all layers of society. We can imagine they were just living their lives, taking care for their family, working for a an income, trying to reach a certain standard of living, or make somehow a difference in life. Though living in a different time and a different location, they were just ordinary people like you and me.

Some of them were more important: The Pharisees and Sadducees were the religious leaders of the people of Israel. The Romans had conquered Israel, and the people had to follow their rule and order. However they let the Pharisees and Sadducees in charge regarding the religious affairs in the synagogues and the temple. These men were the dignitaries, they had reached the highest position of leadership and honour among the people.

**What attracted them in John the Baptist?** Why did the people travel all the way to the Jordan to hear him preach and be baptized?

1. Simple Clothing, Food, Housing. Not much to offer (food, healings)

- His clothing was simple. As Elijah and other prophets before him, his clothes were made of camels hair and he had a leather belt around his waist. Very simple, cheap clothing, absolutely not soft and comfortable. In the eyes of the world he wasn't someone who had made it. He wasn't dressed to impress.

- His meals were simple. He ate locusts and wild honey; food he found in the wilderness.

- His housing was simple. He didn't welcome the people in a beautiful palace or cathedral. He lived in the desert and that's where the people came to. The river Jordan was there, but otherwise it was a hot and hostile environment.

He didn't perform miracles as Jesus did, he didn't heal people, he didn't provide meals. So in that sense not much to offer to the people.

2. Outsider, not a lunatic. The Messiah? Living for Someone else.

- He was an outsider, not that much part of the system. He hadn't settled in like most of the people. Not started a family, not pursuing a career, paying mortgage for a house, building up a retirement fund. He didn't live according to the expectations of this world. All of his appearance and his actions showed he lived for something else. For someone else, for the Messiah he was introducing.

- He was not a lunatic though or a beggar people tried to avoid. He attracted the people; they recognized he spoke words of truth, he triggered their expectations. Was he the ambassador for the long expected Messiah? Or was he the Messiah himself? Not a ruler of the current system, but someone establishing a complete new society...

3. Humble and Brave – Devoted to the Messiah

- He makes clear he isn't the Messiah himself. He is just a humble messenger. "I'm not even worthy to untie or carry his sandals" he says. Normally a task for humble slaves, but even that is too much an honour for John. John's life is completely devoted and surrendered to his Master, the coming Messiah. That's his focus and the drive in his life.

- He is completely convinced his Master is above every other power or authority. Therefore he is not afraid to speak the truth, even to the king Herod. He dared to tell the king it was a sin to marry the wife of his brother. It literally costed him his head, his life on earth. Obeying his heavenly master, living for eternal life, is more important than his life on earth.

## **John preached repentance. Were the people that bad? Psalm 1.**

John called the people to repent, which means to make a 180 degrees u-turn in life. It means to turn away from sin and to turn toward God.

Were these people that bad sinners? I think we would say they were probably not that bad. In general, during that time, the people of Israel were trying to keep to the law, and following the religious customs and regulations. Especially the Pharisees who were proud of being very disciplined in keeping the law very strictly.

Psalm 1. Most of the people of Israel will have known Psalm 1, the opening psalm of the OT songbook: “ Blessed is the one who doesn't mix around with the sinners [paraphrased], but whose delight is in the law of the LORD, ... he is like a **tree** planted on streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither — whatever they do prospers ”

And then: “Not so the wicked. They are like **chaff** that the wind blows away.”

These are the people of Israel who John calls to repentance, especially the religious leaders. Being born in the right family as children of Abraham is not enough. Although they assume they are the good guys, he tells them they are not. They are heading in the wrong direction, with a wrong goal in life.

The ax. They might think they are the trees planted on streams of water, but if they don't produce good fruit they are in danger: The **ax** is already at the root of the tress and will come to cut them down!

The winnowing fork. In stead of being the **good** guys, like trees planted at streams of water, John tells them they are the wicked ones. They think they are **important**, but John tells them **somebody much more important** is on his way to them. He warns them that the Messiah who is coming has the **winnowing fork** in his hand. He will gather the wheat into to the barn and will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire!

The people hear these strong warnings. The message reaches their heart and they do repent. They do turn to God.

### **Are we that bad?**

This same call of repentance comes to us today. Many of us I think consider ourselves to be blessed ones as well, as mentioned in Psalm 1.

We have God's word, we read it, study it, want to live according to it, use it to make our decisions for life. We see ourselves as the trees planted by streams of water. As long as things go well, we can be satisfied, feel blessed, and think we can manage life.

You can lead a very respected life, living like many other people around you, not doing harm to anybody, knowing your Bible and believing in God. But you are in control yourself. You set

your own goals, you decide where you are heading, what you want to reach in life, where you want to live, what you want to do, who you want to mix around with.

People won't say anything bad about you. Perhaps they will even respect you for all your hard work, your orderly lifestyle, the fact that you are able to juggle many balls at once, that you do certain tasks in church, and also volunteer at school. That your life looks so holy. You do your "stinkende best".

Well, this can be a truly stinking matter! Because the danger is there that we leave God out of our daily lives! We only ask him in times of trouble, and he then has to show up to do this or that for us. We use God instead of letting God use us.

However **God does not evolve around our lives, our lives should evolve around God!**

### **Who is in charge of your life?**

Who gave you the privilege of having good brains? Of having the opportunity to study? The ability to work? Who is the owner of your life? Who are you living for?

Answering a question about which command in the law was the most important, Jesus made clear that most important in life is to focus on God and on the people around us when He said:

**"Love the Lord your God** with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: **Love your neighbor** as yourself." Matt.22:37-39.

John the Baptist realized that he was unworthy. Do we realize we are unworthy? Please do a heart check! Do I love God? Do I love my neighbor as myself?

I hope you find yourself unworthy, a sinner, often just living my own directed life, actually not doing very well at all...because this leaves room for God. He wants to forgive you, live in you, live life together with you.

### **A tricky question**

If we turn to God, asking Him to enter our lives as the one in charge, we're making room for Him. In the words of John: we're making a straight path for the Lord to enter. We ask him for directions: Lord what do you want me to do? Today, this week, this coming year...

That's a tricky question. It reminds me of the story of the rich young man who came to Jesus and told Him that he had kept all God's commandments. He didn't murder, steal, commit adultery. He honored his parents and loved his neighbors. "What am I lacking?" he asks. "What should I do to gain eternal life?" (he does not want to be blown away like chaff, he wants to be that tree planted at streams of living water! Forever!)

Jesus said to him, "If you wish to be complete, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me." But when the young man heard this statement, he went away grieved; for he was one who owned much property." Mat.19:21-22

The man believed in God, and in his own eyes he was doing quite well in keeping God's laws. But Jesus challenged him in giving up his wealth, his earthly securities. The man went away, he didn't dare to obey Jesus' instructions for him, to give up his securities and trust God for the outcome of it.

Where are these man's possessions now? Where is the man now? We don't know whether this man changed his mind later. He said he wanted to have eternal life, but at that time he couldn't give up the control over his earthly life.

Turning to God and asking Him to take control over your life is tricky, it's an adventure. You don't know the outcome. The only thing you know is that God loves you and will care for you.

### **What about you?**

The message of John was to repent. He called the people to make straight ways for the King of heaven so that He could enter their lives. His words didn't go in one ear and out the other. The people repented and asked what they should do.

1. **Have you repented** from your own self-directed lifestyle, and turned to him? To the One who says 'I am who I am'. The One who is. The One who is here with us, and who has revealed himself in Jesus.

2. **Do you count on his goodness** for you?

I remember when I was sixteen that this message became very clear to me. I had this suspicion that if I would really surrender, He might send me to a prison camp in Siberia, or He wants me to marry a pious, but not so attractive girl... Then I realized how negative I thought about God. He is good, he is love, he wants to bless his people! I made that decision then to trust Him. And I have had to make that decision many times again. It's a daily decision I have to make.

**What fear holds you back from surrendering** to your Creator, your loving Father? He knows what is best for you. He has a perfect plan for your life.

**Are you willing to let him come in and fill you with his love?** A love that will overflow toward others around you? So that will you be like a tree, planted by streams of water, bearing fruit for Jesus.

### **Psalm 1**

1 Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked  
or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers,

2 but whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and who meditates on his law day and night.

3 That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season  
and whose leaf does not wither - whatever they do prospers.

4 Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away.