

The Sunday Gospel

Second Sunday of Advent

(Lectionary Year A) Matthew 3:1-12

About today:

The Second Sunday of Advent sets before us a striking pair of images: Isaiah's peaceful shoot growing from the stump of Jesse, and John the Baptist's fiery call in the wilderness. Isaiah envisions a world renewed by the Spirit where wisdom, justice, and reconciliation blossom under the rule of the coming Messiah. In the gospel, John urges the crowds to prepare for that very kingdom by turning their hearts toward God, bearing fruit that matches their longing for new life.

Taken together, these readings invite us to hold hope and conversion side by side: to trust that God's promised renewal is already at work, and to ready ourselves (through repentance, simplicity of heart, and integrity) to welcome Christ who comes to judge and to heal.

The apparent tension between the readings becomes more evident in the season of Advent as we are invited to be both patient and active: we wait for the peace Isaiah foresees by becoming the people John calls us to be.

Gospel Reading

Read the whole passage slowly a few times, keeping one or two minutes of silence between each time.

^{3:1} In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming,

² “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

³ This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’”

⁴ Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.

⁵ Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan,

⁶ and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

⁷ But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?

⁸ Bear fruit worthy of repentance.

⁹ Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.

¹⁰ Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

¹¹ “I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

¹² His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire”.

Broader Picture:

Matthew 3 marks the shift from Jesus’ infancy to his public mission. After two chapters steeped in fulfilment of ancient prophecies, a long genealogy, and divine protection, the narrative moves from quiet beginnings to public proclamation. John the Baptist enters the scene as the forerunner promised in Scripture – “*the voice crying in the wilderness*” – and his appearance signals that God’s long-promised intervention in history is now breaking in through the person of Jesus Christ.

Here John stands at the threshold between the old covenant and the new. His clothing, diet, and message evoke Elijah, and he embodies the whole prophetic tradition of the Old Testament. His presence signals that the time of waiting is over: the messianic age is imminently arriving.

Interpretation Notes:

v.1: “...*John the Baptist appeared...*” Unlike with Jesus, there is no build-up, no genealogy to signal the arrival of John. He simply “appears” in the wilderness. The way in which Matthew introduces him highlights the urgency of repentance. Saint Jerome remarks on the location as symbolic of John’s unique mission: while Jesus is born in Bethlehem and raised in Nazareth, John’s ministry begins outside settled places – he is a “liminal” figure, standing between covenants.

v. 2: “*Repent...*” Repentance (*metanoia*) is a change of mind and life, a turning from self to God. This repentance is the doorway through which the kingdom enters human experience.

v.3: “...*The voice ... in the wilderness...*” This is a quotation from Isaiah 40:3 originally referring to the return of Israel from exile. In the coming of Christ a new, greater restoration from exile is accomplished for those who repent and follow Him as they are made part of the Kingdom of heaven.

Matthew quotes from the Septuagint (LXX, the Greek version of the Old Testament), not from the Hebrew text. The Hebrew can be read as: “*A voice cries: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord.’*” – placing the preparation in the wilderness.

Important to note here is that God honours human cooperation in salvation history; John’s role is key to usher in the ministry of the Lord.

v. 4: “...*wore clothing of camel's hair...*” John’s life in the desert is marked by great poverty and simplicity. This highlights the urgency of his message as he does not look for earthly comforts or pleasures. John is uniquely focused on his mission. Moreover, Saint John Chrysostom notes that John’s asceticism is both a critique of luxury and a sign that the coming kingdom is not aligned with worldly standards.

v.6: “...*confessing their sins.*” John’s baptism is not a trinitarian baptism like ours. Its main purpose is to cleanse people from their sins. Those receiving

baptism confess their sins as they are washed clean. Their honesty opens the way to genuine repentance.

v.7: “...*You brood of vipers!* ...” This “greeting” is reserved for the Pharisees and Sadducees which enter the scene as the latest opponents to the life-giving message of repentance. Both in this verse and later on John wants the people to understand that external religious identity cannot substitute for inward transformation.

Why these words? Saint Gregory the Great observes that vipers are known for devouring their own mothers at birth – an image of those who claim spiritual ancestry but destroy it through hypocrisy.

v. 8: “...*fruit worthy of repentance...*” Repentance is proven by visible change and by our good works. It is not a feeling but a fruit-bearing way of life as grace reshapes actions, desires, and relationships.

v. 9: “...*Do not presume to say...*” For the religious elite of the time this was a difficult concept to accept: physical descent from Abraham is insufficient; true children of Abraham imitate his faith.

As a side note... in accordance with this principle, we are children of Abraham, not by bloodline but by faith. In the Roman Canon the priest prays that the Eucharistic sacrifice may be accepted by God as was the one offered by “*Abraham, our father in faith*”.

vv. 10-12: “...*he will clear his threshing floor...*” The ministry of the Messiah presented by John may not be so easy to reconcile with our cosy images of Jesus “meek and mild”, however, John’s image points us towards the coming of Jesus as divinely appointed judge and Lord.

However, there is more to this. In classical theology, divine judgment is simply God’s holiness revealing things as they actually are. Healing requires this truth. A physician cannot heal a wound that is denied. Thus, judgment and healing are not opposites; they belong together, and they are united in the ministry of Jesus.

Therefore, we should not read these verses as just referring to Jesus' second coming, but also to his healing/refining action in the soul of each believer now. Saint Augustine of Hippo notes that wheat and chaff are mixed within each person, and Christ's winnowing is an interior separation – sorting what in us is truly of God from what is empty and dead. St Gregory the Great adds that this action is ongoing in the Church and in the conscience.

This interpretation reframes the imagery of Jesus as judge (before the Last Judgment): today Christ is not dividing humanity into winners and losers; He is dividing truth from falsehood within each soul.

Questions for this week:

- *“Prepare the way of the Lord.”*
Where in my life is the “wilderness” where God might be calling me to listen more deeply or clear space for His presence?
- *Wheat and chaff together.*
Can I recognise the “wheat” and “chaff” within my own soul? What might it look like to entrust the sorting to Christ rather than to shame or self-criticism?
- *John’s humility as the Voice pointing to the Word.*
How might I become more of a “voice” that points others to Christ, rather than to myself?
- *The urgency and gentleness of Advent.*
Where do I sense Christ inviting me to take one small, concrete step toward Him?

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