

Lord, we pray for all who minister in Your name in Your Church. Strengthen them in time of weakness, and direct them in all their work for You. Give to them the spirit of power, and of love, and of sound mind, that they may diligently preach Your Word and set forth Your glory, to the building up of Your Church and the salvation of souls; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (*Parish Prayers*, ed. Frank Colquhoun, p. 27)

Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to Him, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" And Jesus answered them, "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." 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? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written, "Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, who will prepare Your way before You."

In Christ Jesus, by whose Word strengthens and keeps all believers in the faith which alone saves sinners, dear fellow redeemed:

You may have heard me make this observation before: I am so blessed that I get to serve a congregation that has more than one pastor, so that I get to hear the Word of our Lord preached on a regular basis. A pastor who serves a parish alone does not have that blessing. Yes, now he can go online and hear other proclaimers of the Word, but usually a pastor has enough to do to attend the needs of the flock over which the Spirit has called him to pastor.

We observe in our text a preacher who was in that situation of proclaiming the truth that set sinners free, but could not be the hearer of that objective word. Yes, yes, I know a preacher should listen to himself. In fact, he should first preach to himself before preaching to his fellow believing sinners. However, it is easy for his own sinful flesh to raise up doubts about what comes from his own mouth. So let us consider this: **Gospel Preachers' Faith Comes by Hearing too!**

I

We are told in Rom. 10: "faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of Christ." John the Baptizer's faith had the same source not only for faith created in his heart, but kept by that same Word. We may find it strange that this bold and faithful preacher would send word by his disciples to Jesus and ask: "Are you the one who is to

come, or shall we look for another?" But think of what this faithful preacher was experiencing at the time. He was in Herod's dungeon awaiting possible execution for faithfully preaching the Word of God as the prophet of the Most High God. Did he fail in properly preparing the way for the coming Christ?

Reading between the lines, Jesus heard from John: "I believe, Jesus, help me in my unbelief." So what does Jesus do for John? He proclaims the Word of the Lord, sending his disciples back while quoting prophecies concerning the Christ as recorded by Isaiah. "[T]ell 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."

John heard both Law and Gospel from the lips of His Lord as carried back to him by his disciples. It was the very Law and Gospel he had so faithfully proclaimed out in the wilderness. The Law was even gently put before this persecuted prophet by Jesus – "blessed is the one who is not offended by Me". However Jesus was going about doing exactly what Isaiah prophesied about the Christ – giving sight to the blind, enabling the lame to walk, cleansing lepers, opening the ears of the deaf, raising the dead. And doing especially what He was now doing for John, preaching the good news of God's everlasting love and salvation to the poor in spirit.

John was not impervious to the attacks from our shared diabolical foe. Keep in mind how the Apostle Paul writing a few chapters after the epistle lesson spoke how it was necessary to follow the same spiritual discipline as all Christians, so that "after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified." John, this faithful and yet vulnerable preacher of Christ, had his faith fortified by the very same Word you too hear today. *God loves you John, His Christ has come as you faithfully announced and is about doing the work of saving you and all people for all eternity. Fear not, in this Holy One you are saved.*

II

John was a popular figure, even though he was out in the wilderness. He stirred up much interest among those spiritually in search for a Savior and those who felt threatened wishing only to criticize and debunk. After John's disciples left to return to John with the good news, which he would get to hear soon, Jesus confronted those who had gone out to see John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses." John was neither, much to his

detractors' disappointment. But to those who had true spiritual curiosity Jesus asked: "What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written, 'Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, who will prepare Your way before You.'"

Luther makes this observation about John and his faithful work as Christ's forerunner: *"John ... does not insert his leather belt into his teaching. He has the townspeople and peasants stay in the cities and does not say that they are to eat honey and use his diet. He does not turn his life into a rule, but draws himself and all people to one name, Christ, and has no desire that they should follow his way of life, but rather his teaching. ... Therefore his belt is of no concern to us. [Luther goes on:] I have seen monks who were called Johannites, who tried to live according to John's external conduct, and dismissed the Lord Christ to whom he pointed. We are not to look to John nor imitate his life, but to pay attention to Him to whom he points with his finger."* Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world – Christ Jesus.

John certainly believed in Jesus as the Christ. But it is not strange that his sinful nature and Satan, the great deceiver, had him doubting what he so faithfully proclaimed. John needed to hear it from a voice outside himself, which his disciples provided by having been sent back by the Lord Himself with that objective Word.

What goes on here regularly – the proclamation of the saving truth concerning Christ Jesus, should not be taken for granted by you. Ever so often a Christian who has started to fall away will cling to the notion that he/she can self-medicate and read God's Word privately. Of course, God's powerful Word is found there, but our spiritual enemies have a way of setting us up with such a practice and pulling the rug out from under us. It happens in several ways. Self medicating with the Word we may shift the emphasis from the Gospel to the Law and find *"comfort"* in the law imaging we are superior in our righteousness compared to others we know. Or when we self-medicate, the voice of our conscience starts screaming louder than what we are reading and we think there is no way God will forgive some of our despicable thoughts, words or actions.

Your faith in Christ, which saves you, comes by hearing, but so does the faith of those called to proclaim it to you. It is the Word of Christ, the Gospel of what God has done for all sinners through His life, suffering, death and resurrection. This is what we count on hearing throughout the church year, whether we are celebrating Christmas, Easter, Pentecost or the longer Trinity season.

John's work as Christ's forerunner was not over; his execution would culminate his work. Hearing the very message, he faithfully proclaimed, needed to be heard and believed by him too. He heard it and believed it. Blessed be his memory for Christ's sake.

So you my fellow hearers of God's Word of power and grace have heard it and believe it too. Your sins are all forgiven. You are declared righteous. John never heard in this life from the warden of Herod's dungeon: "*you are free to go*". Yet, God declared to John that the greater jailer, Satan, no longer had anything to hold him in the bondage of his kingdom of hell. So it is with you. You, my fellow sinners, have been set free. If the Son has set you free, which He has, then you are free indeed! Amen.