

## Fourth Sunday in Advent;

John 1:19-28

**The Witness and Confession of John the Baptist; and the Spiritual Meaning of His Witness**

### **I. THE WITNESS AND CONFESSION OF JOHN THE BAPTIST.**

1. With many words the Evangelist describes and magnifies the testimony of John. Although it would have been sufficient if he had written of him, "He confessed," he repeats it and says, "He confessed and denied not." This was surely done in order to extol the beautiful constancy of John in a sore trial, when he was tempted to a flagrant denial of the truth. And now consider the particular circumstances.

2. First, there are sent to him not servants or ordinary citizens, but priests and Levites from the highest and noblest class, who were Pharisees, that is to say, the leaders of the people. Surely a distinguished embassy for a common man, who might justly have felt proud of such an honor, for the favor of lords and princes is highly esteemed in this world.

3. Secondly, they sent to him not common people, but citizens of Jerusalem, to wit, the capital, the sanhedrin, and the leaders of the Jewish nation. So it was as if the entire people came and did honor to him. What a wind that was! and how he might have been inflated, had he possessed a vain and worldly heart!

4. Thirdly, they do not offer him a present, nor ordinary glory, but the highest glory of all, the kingdom and all authority, being ready to accept him as the Christ. Surely a mighty and sweet temptation! For, had he not perceived that they wished to regard him as the Christ, he would not have said, "*I am not the Christ.*" And Luke, 3,15-16, also writes that, when everybody thought he was the Christ, John spoke, "*I am not he who you think I am, but I am being sent before him.*"

5. Fourthly, when he would not accept this honor they tried him with another, and were ready to take him for Elijah. For they had a prophecy in the last chapter of the prophet Malachi, where God says: *"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet, before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord; and he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to the fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse."*

6. Fifthly, seeing that he would not be Elijah, they go on tempting him and offer him the homage due to an ordinary prophet, for since Malachi they had not had a prophet. John, however, remains firm and unshaken, although tried by the offer of so much honor.

7. Sixthly and lastly, not knowing of any more honors, they left him to choose, as to who or what he wished to be regarded, for they greatly desired to do him homage. But John will have none of this honor, and gives only this for an answer, that he is a voice calling to them and to everybody. This they do not heed. - What all this means we shall hear later on. Let us now examine the text. *"And this is the witness of John, when the Jews sent unto him from Jerusalem priests and Levites to ask him, Who art thou?"*

8. They sent to him, why did they not come themselves? John had come to preach repentance to the entire Jewish people. This preaching of John they did not heed; it is clear therefore, that they did not send to him with good and pure intentions, offering him such honor. Neither did they truly believe him to be the Christ, or Elijah, or a prophet; otherwise they would have come themselves to be baptized, as did the others. What then did they seek of him? Christ explains this, John 5, 33-35, *"Ye have sent unto John, and he hath borne witness unto the truth. He was the lamp that burneth and shineth, and ye were willing to rejoice for a season in his light." From these words it is clear they looked for their own honor in John, desiring to make use of his light,* his illustrious and famous name, in order to adorn themselves before the people. For if John had joined them and accepted their proffered honor, they also would have become great and glorious before all the people, as being worthy of the friendship and reverence of so holy and great a man. But would not hereby all their avarice, tyranny, and rascality have been confirmed and declared holy and worthy? Thus John, with all his holiness, would have become a sponsor for vice; and the coming of Christ would justly have been regarded with suspicion, as being opposed to the doings of the priests and tyrants, with whom John, this great and holy man, would have taken sides.

9. Thus we see what rascality they practice and how they tempt John to betray Christ and become a Judas Iscariot, in order that he might confirm their injustice and they might share his honor and popularity. What cunning fellows they are, thus to fish for John's honor! They offer him an apple for a kingdom, and would exchange counters for

dollars. But he remained firm as a rock, as is shown by the statement: *"And he confessed, and denied not; and he confessed, I am not the Christ."*

10. John's confession comprises two things: First, his confessing, and secondly, his not denying. His confessing is his declaration about Christ, when he says, "I am not the Christ." To this belongs also that he confesses to be neither Elijah nor a prophet. His not denying is declaration of what he really is, when he calls himself a voice in the wilderness, preparing the way of the Lord. Thus his confession is free and open, declaring not only what he is, but also what he is not. For if some one declares what he is not, such a confession is still obscure and incomplete, since one cannot know what is really to be thought of him. But here John openly says, what is to be thought of him, and what not, this giving the people a certain assurance in confessing that he is not the Christ, and not denying that he is the voice preparing his advent.

11. Yet someone might say, The Evangelist contradicts himself in calling it a confession when John declares himself not to be Christ, whereas this is rather a denial, for he denies that he is Christ. To say, "Nay" is to deny, and the Jews wish him to confess that he is Christ, which he denies; yet the Evangelist says that he confessed. And again, it is rather a confession when he says, "I am the voice in the wilderness." But the Evangelist 'considers this matter and describes it as it is before God, and not as the words sound and appear to men. For the Jews desired him to deny Christ, and not to confess what he really was. But since he confesses what he is and firmly insists upon what he is not, his act is before God a precious confession and not a denial. *"And they asked him, what then? Art thou Elijah? And he saith, 'I am not:'"*

12. The Jews, as said above, had the prophecy concerning Elijah, that he was to come before the day of the Lord, Mal. 4, 5. It is therefore also among Christians a current belief that Elijah is to come before the last day. Some add Enoch, others St. John the Evangelist. Of this we shall have something to say.

13. In the first place, all depends upon whether the prophet Malachi speaks of the second coming of the Lord on the last day, or of his first coming into flesh and through the Gospel. If he speaks of the last day, then we have certainly yet to expect Elijah; for God cannot lie. The coming of Enoch and St. John, however, has no foundation in Scripture, and is therefore to be considered as a fable. If, on the other hand, the prophet speaks of Christ's coming in the flesh and through the Word, then assuredly Elijah is no more to be expected, but John is that same Elijah announced by Malachi.

14. I am of the opinion that Malachi spoke of no other Elijah than John, and that Elijah the Tishbite, who went up to heaven with the chariot of fire, is no more to be expected.

To this opinion I am forced first and foremost by the words of the angel Gabriel, Luke 1, 17, who says to John's father, Zacharias: "And he shall go before his face in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to walk in the wisdom of the just." With these words the angel manifestly refers to the prophecy of Malachi, adducing even the words of the prophet, who also says that Elijah is to turn the hearts of fathers to children, - as cited above. Now then, if Malachi had meant another Elijah, the angel doubtless would not have applied these words to John.

15. In the second place, the Jews themselves of old understood Malachi to speak of Christ's coming into the flesh. Therefore they here ask John whether he is Elijah, who is to come before the Christ. But they erred in thinking of the original and bodily Elijah. For the purport of the text is indeed that Elijah is to come beforehand, but not that same Elijah. We do not read, Elijah the Tishbite is to come, as the Bible calls him in 1 Kings 17, 1 and 2 Kings 1, 3. 8, but merely Elijah, a prophet. This Gabriel, Luke 1, 17, explains as meaning, "In the spirit and power of Elijah," saying, as it were, He will be a real Elijah. Just as we now say of one who has another's manner and carriage, He is a true X.; as I may say e.g., The Pope is a real Caiaphas; John was a real St. Paul. In the same manner does God through Malachi promise one who is to be a true Elijah, i.e. John the Baptist.

16. Yet would I not trust the interpretation of the Jews alone, were it not confirmed by Christ, Math. 10, 10ff. When, on Mount Tabor, the disciples saw Elijah and Moses, they said to the Lord, "Why then say the scribes that Elijah must first come?" They meant to say, "You have already come; yet Elijah has not come first, but only now, after you: and was it not said that he was to come before you?" This interpretation was not rejected, but confirmed by Christ, who said, "*Elijah truly shall first come, and restore all things. But I say unto you that Elijah is come already; and they knew him not, but have done unto him whatsoever they listed.*" Then the disciples understood, says St. Matthew, that he spoke of John the Baptist. St. Mark likewise says, 9, 13, "*But I say unto you that Elijah is come, and they have done unto him whatsoever they would, even as it is written of him.*"

17. Now there is no other prophecy concerning Elijah's coming but this one of Malachi, and Christ himself applies it to John. Thus it has no force if someone were to object, Christ says that Elijah is to come first and restore all things, for Christ interprets his own words by saying, "But I tell you that Elijah is come" etc. He means to say, It is right and true what you have heard about Elijah, that he is to come first and restore all things; thus it is written and thus it must come to pass. But they do not know of which Elijah this is said, for he is come already. With these words, therefore, Christ confirms the Scriptures and the interpretation concerning the coming Elijah, but he rejects the false interpretation concerning an Elijah other than John.

18. Most strongly, however, does Christ assert, Math. 11, 13ff., that no other Elijah is coming. He says, "All the prophets and the law prophesied until John. And if you will receive it, this is Elijah, that is to come. He that hath ears to hear, let him hear." Here it is made clear that but one Elijah was to come. Had there been another he would not have said, "*John is Elijah who was to come,*" but he would have had to say, "*John is one of the Elijahs,*" or simply, "*He is Elijah.*" But by 'calling John that Elijah whom everybody expects, who, doubtless, was announced to come, he makes it sufficiently clear that the prophecy of Malachi is fulfilled in John, and that after this no other Elijah is to be expected.

19. We insist, therefore, that the Gospel, through which Christ has come into all the world, is the last message before the day of judgment; before this message and advent of Christ John came and prepared the way. And although all the prophets and the law prophesy until John, it is not allowed to apply them, neglecting John, to another Elijah who is yet to come. Thus also the prophecy of Malachi must fit the times of John. He carries the line of the prophets down to John's times and permits no one to pass by. – And so we conclude with certainty that no other Elijah is to come, and that the Gospel will endure unto the end of the world. "*Art thou the prophet? And he answered, no.*"

20. Some think the Jews here asked concerning that prophet of whom Moses writes in Deut. 18, 15: "The Lord thy God will raise up unto thee a prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me, etc." But this passage St. Peter in Acts 3, 22 and St. Stephen in Acts 7, 37 apply to Christ himself, which is the correct interpretation. The Jews also certainly held this prophet in equal esteem with Moses, above Elijah, and therefore understood him to be Christ. They asked John whether he was an ordinary prophet, like the others, since he was neither Christ nor Elijah. For they had had no prophet since the days of Malachi, who was the last and concluded the Old Testament with the above mentioned prophecy concerning the coming of Elijah. John therefore is the nearest to and first after Malachi, who in finishing his book points to him. - The Jews then asked whether he was one of the prophets. Christ likewise says of him, Math. 11, 9: "*Wherefore went ye out? To see a prophet? Yea, I say unto you, and much more than a prophet.*" And Matthew says in 21, 26, "*All hold John as a prophet.*"

21. Now the question arises, Did John really confess the truth when he denied that he was Elijah or a prophet, whereas Christ himself called him Elijah and more than a prophet? He himself knew that he had come in the spirit and power of Elijah, and that the Scriptures called him Elijah. To say, therefore, that he did not consider himself a prophet because he was more than a prophet, is disgraceful and makes him an empty boaster. The truth of the matter is, that he simply and in a straightforward manner confessed the truth, namely, that he was not that Elijah about whom they asked, nor a

prophet. For the prophets commonly led and taught the people, who sought advice and help from them. Such a one John was not and would not be, for the Lord was present, whom they were to follow and adhere to. He did not desire to draw the people to himself, but to lead them to Christ, which was needful before Christ himself came. A prophet foretells the coming of Christ. John, however, shows him present, which is not a prophet's task. Just so a priest in the bishop's presence would direct the people away from himself to the bishop, saying, *"I am not priest; yonder is your priest"*; but in the bishop's absence he would rule the people in the place of the bishop.

22. John likewise directs the people away from himself to Christ. And although this is a higher and greater office than that of a prophet, yet it is not so on account of his merit, but on account of the presence of his Master. And in praising John for being more than a prophet, not his worthiness but that of his Master, who is present, is extolled. For it is customary for a servant to receive greater honor and reverence in the absence of his master than in his presence.

23. Even so the rank of a prophet is higher than that of John, although his office is greater and more immediate. For a prophet rules and leads the people, and they adhere to him; but John does no more than direct them away from himself to Christ, the present Master. Therefore, in the simplest and most straightforward manner, he denied being a prophet, although abounding in all the qualities of a prophet. This he did for the sake of the people, in order that they might not accept his testimony as the foretelling of a prophet and expect Christ in other, future times, but that they might recognize him as a forerunner and guide, and follow his guidance to the Lord, who was present. Witness the following words of the text: *"They said therefore unto him, Who art thou? that we, may give an answer to them that sent us. What sayest thou of thyself? He said, I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said Isaiah the prophet."*

24. This is the second part of his confession, in which he declares what he is, after having denied that he was Christ, or Elijah, or a prophet. As though he were to say, Your salvation is much too near for a prophet to be required. Do not strain your eyes so far out into the future, for the Lord of all the prophets is himself here, so that no prophet is needed. The Lord is coming this way, whose forerunner I am; he is treading on my heels. I am not prophesying of him as a seer, but crying as a courier, to make room for him as he walks along. I do not say, as the prophets, *"Behold, he is to come"*; but I say, *"Behold, he is coming, he is here. I am not bringing word about him, but pointing to him with my finger. Did not Isaiah long ago foretell that such a crying to make room for the Lord should go before him? Such I am, and not a prophet. Therefore, step aside and make room, permit the Lord himself to walk among you bodily, and do not look for any more prophecies about him."*

25. Now this is the answer which no learned, wise, and holy men can bear; therefore John must surely be a heretic and be possessed of the devil. Only sinners and fools think him a holy, pious man, listen to his crying and make room for the Lord, removing whatsoever obstructs his way. The others, however, throw logs, stones and dirt in his way, aye, they even kill both the Lord and his forerunner for presuming to say such things to him. And why? John tells them to prepare the way of the Lord. That is to say, they have not the Lord nor his way in them. What have they then? Where the Lord is not, nor his way, there must be man's own way, the devil, and all that is evil. judge then, whether those holy wise people are not justly incensed at John, condemn his word, and finally slay both him and his Master! Shall he presume to hand such holy people over to the devil, and denounce all their doings as false, wicked and damnable, claiming that their ways are not the Lord's ways, that they must first of all prepare the Lord's ways, and that they have lived all their holy lives in vain?

26. Yet, if he quietly wrote it on a tablet, they might still hear it in patience. But he gives utterance to it, yea, he cries it aloud, and that not in a corner, but openly under the sky, in the wilderness, before all the world, utterly disgracing before everybody those saints with all their doings and discrediting them with all the people. Thus they lose all honor and profit which their holy life formerly brought them. This certainly such pious men cannot bear, but for God's and justice's sake they cannot damn that false doctrine, in order that the poor people may not be misled and the service of God be not corrupted; aye, finally, they will have to kill John and his Master, to serve and obey God the Father.

27. This, then, is the preparation of Christ's way and John's proper office. He is to humble all the world, and proclaim that they are all sinners - lost, damned, poor, miserable, pitiable people; that there is no life, work, or rank however holy, beautiful and good it may appear, but is damnable unless Christ our God dwell therein, unless he work, walk, live, be and do everything through faith in him; in short, that they all need Christ and should anxiously strive to share his grace. Behold, where this is practiced, namely, that all man's work and life is as nothing, there you have the true crying of John in the wilderness and the pure and clear truth of Christianity, as St. Paul shows, Rom. 3, 23: *"All have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God."* This is truly to humiliate man, to cut out and annihilate his presumption. Aye, this is indeed to prepare the way of the Lord, to give room and to make way.

28. Now here are found two kinds of people: some believe the crying of John and confess it to be what he says. These are the people to whom the Lord comes, in them his way is prepared and made even, as St. Peter says in 1 Pet. 5, 5: "God giveth grace to the humble"; and the Lord himself says in Luke 18,14: "He that humbleth himself shall be

exalted." You must here diligently learn, and understand spiritually what the way of the Lord is, how it is prepared, and what prevents him from finding room in us. The way of the Lord, as you have heard, is that he does all things within you, so that all our works are not ours but his, which comes by faith.

29. This, however, is not possible if you desire worthily to prepare yourself by praying, fasting, self-mortification, and your own works, as is now generally and foolishly taught during the time of Advent. A spiritual preparation is meant, consisting in a thoroughgoing knowledge and confession of your being unfit, a sinner, poor, damned, and miserable, with all the works you may perform. The more a heart is thus minded, the better it prepares the way of the Lord, although meanwhile possibly drinking fine wines, walking on roses, and not praying a word.

30. The hindrance, however, which obstructs the Lord's way, is formed not only in the coarse and palpable sin of adultery, wrath, haughtiness, avarice, etc., but rather in spiritual conceit and pharisaical pride, which thinks highly of its own life and good works, feels secure, does not condemn itself, and would remain uncondemned by another.

Such, then, is the other class of men, namely, those that do not believe the crying of John, but call it the devil's, since it forbids good works and condemns the service of God, as they say. These are the people to whom most of all and most urgently it is said, "Prepare the way of the Lord," and who least of all accept it.

31. Therefore John speaks to them with cutting words in Luke 3,7-8: "Ye offspring of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits worthy of repentance." But, as said above, the more just people are urged to prepare the Lord's way, the more they obstruct it and the more unreasonable they become. They will not be told that their doings are not the Lord's, and finally, to the glory and honor of God, they annihilate the truth and the word of John, himself and his Master to boot.

32. Judge, then, whether it was not a mighty confession on the part of John, when he dared to open his mouth and proclaim that he was not Christ, but a voice to which they did not like to listen, chiding the great teachers and leaders of the people for not doing that which was right and the Lord's pleasure. And as it went with John, so it still goes, from the beginning of the world unto the end. For such conceited piety will not be told that it must first and foremost prepare the way of the Lord, imagining itself to sit in God's lap and desiring to be petted and flattered by having long ago finished the way, before God even thought of finding a way for them - those precious saints! The pope and his followers likewise have condemned the crying of John to prepare the Lord's way. Aye, it is an intolerable crying - except to poor, penitent sinners with aggrieved consciences, for whom it is the best of cordials.



33. But isn't it a perverse and strange manner of speaking to say, "I am the voice of one crying"? How can a man be a voice? He ought to have said, I am one crying with a voice! - But that it speaking according to the manner of the Scriptures. In Ex. 4,16 God spoke to Moses: "Aaron shall be to thee a mouth." And in Job 29,15 we read: "I was eyes to the blind, and feet was I to the lame." Similarly we say of a man that gold is his heart and money his life.

So here, "I am the voice of one crying" means: I am one who cries, and have received my name from my office; even as Aaron is called a mouth because of his speaking, I am a voice because of my crying. And that which in Hebrew reads vox clamantis, the voice of one crying, would be translated into Latin: vox clamans, a crying voice. Thus St. Paul in Rom. 15, 26 says pauperes sanctorum, the poor of the saints, instead of pauperes sancti, the poor saints; and 1 Tim. 3, 16: mysterium pietatis (the mystery of godliness) instead of mysterium pium (the godly mystery). Instead of saying: The language of the Germans, I had better say, the German language. Thus "a voice of one crying" means "a crying voice". In Hebrew there are many similar phrases. And they had been sent from the Pharisees. And they asked him, and said unto him: Why then baptizest thou if thou be not the Christ, nor Elijah, neither the prophet? John answered them, saying I baptize with water; in the midst of you standeth one whom ye know not, even he that cometh after me is preferred before me, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose.

34. It seems as though the Evangelist had omitted something in these words, and as if John's complete answer ought to be: "I baptize with water; but he has come among you who baptizes with fire". Thus Luke (3, 16) says: 'I baptize you with water: but he shall baptize you with fire.' And in Acts 1, 5 we read, "John baptized with water, but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost." But, although he here says nothing of this other baptism, he sufficiently indicates that there is to be another baptism, since he speaks of another who is coming after him and who, undoubtedly, will not baptize with water.

35. Now begins the second onset, whereby John was tried on the other side. For not being able to move him by allurements they attack him with threats. And here is uncovered their false humility, manifesting itself as pride and haughtiness. The same they would have done had John followed them, after they had had enough of him. Learn therefore here to be on your guard against men, particularly when they feign to be gentle and kind; as Christ says. Math. 10, 16-47: "Beware of men, be wise as serpents, and harmless as doves." That is to say, Do not trust those that are smooth, and do no evil to your enemies.

36. Behold, these Pharisees, who professed their willingness to accept John as the Christ, veer around when things turn out as they desired, and censure John's baptism. They say, as it were, *"Since you are not Christ, nor Elijah, nor a prophet, you are to*

*know that we are your superiors according to the law of Moses and you are therefore to conduct yourself as our subordinate. You are not to act independently, without our command, our knowledge and without our permission. Who has given you power to introduce something new among our people with your baptizing? You are bringing yourself into trouble with your criminal disobedience".*

37. John however, as he had despised their hypocrisy, likewise scorns their threats, remains firm, and confesses Christ as before. Moreover he boldly attacks them and charges them with ignorance, saying, as it were: "I have no authority from you to baptize with water. But what of that? There is another from whom I have power; him you do not know, but he is amply sufficient for me. If you knew him, or wished to know him, you would not ask whence I have power to baptize, but you would come to be baptized yourselves. For he is so much greater than I, that I am not worthy to unloose his shoes' latchet.

38. John's words, "*He it is who, coming after me, is preferred before me,*" three times quoted by the Evangelist in this chapter, have been misinterpreted and obscured by some who referred them to Christ's divine and eternal birth, as though John meant to say that Christ had been born before him in eternity. But what is remarkable is the fact that he was born before John in eternity, seeing that he was born before the world and all other things? Thus he was also to come not only after him, but after all things, since he is the first and the last (Rev. 1, 11). Therefore, his past and his future agree. John's words are clear and simple, referring to Christ when he already was a man. The words "*He will come after me*" cannot be taken to mean that he would be born after him; John like Christ, was at that time about thirty years old.

39. These words then evidently apply to his preaching. He means to say: "*I have come - that is, I have begun to preach but I shall soon stop, and another will come and preach after me.*" Thus St. Luke says, Acts 1, 22, that Christ began from the baptism of John; and, Luke 3, 23, that Jesus was thirty years old when he began. And Math. 11, 3: "*Art thou he that should come,*" that is, he who should begin to preach; for Christ's office does not begin till after his baptism, at which his father had acknowledged and glorified him. Then also began the New Testament and the time of grace, not at the birth of Christ, as he himself says, Mark 1, 15: "*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand.*" Had he not begun to preach, his birth would have been of no use; but when he did begin to act and to teach, then were fulfilled all prophecies, all Scriptures, then came a new light, and a new world.

40. So we see what he means by saying, "He will come after me." But the meaning of the words, "He is preferred before me; he was before me," is not yet clear, some referring them to Christ's eternal birth. We maintain in all simplicity that those words

also were spoken concerning their preaching. Thus the meaning is: "Although he is not yet preaching, but is coming after me, and I am preaching before him: nevertheless he is already at hand, and so close by that, before I began to preach, he has already been there and has been appointed to preach. The words "before me" therefore point to John's office, and not to his person. Thus, "he has been before my preaching and baptism for about thirty years; but he has not yet come, and has not yet begun. John thereby indicates his office, namely, that he is not a prophet foretelling the coming of Christ, but one who precedes him who is already present, who is so near that he has already been in existence so many years before his beginning and coming.

41. Therefore he also says: "*In the midst of you standeth one whom ye know not.*" He means to say: "Do not permit your eyes to wander off into future ages. He of whom the prophets speak has been among you in the Jewish nation for well nigh thirty years. Take care and do not miss him. You do not know him, therefore I have come to point him out to you." The words, "In the midst of you standeth one," are spoken after the manner of the Scriptures, which say, A prophet will arise or stand up. Thus Math. 24, 24, "There shall arise false prophets." Deut. 18, 15 God says, "*The Lord thy God will raise up unto thee a prophet.*" John now wishes to show that this "raising up, arising, standing," etc. was fulfilled in Christ, who was already standing among them, as God had prophesied; the people however knew him not.

42. This then is the other office of John and of every preacher of the Gospel, not alone to make all the world sinners, as we have heard above (§24ff.); but also to give comfort and show how we may get rid of our sins; this he does in pointing to him who is to come. Hereby he directs us to Christ, who is to redeem us from our sins, if we accept him in true faith. The first office says: "You are all sinners, and are wanting in the way of the Lord." When we believe this, the other office follows and says; "Listen, and accept Christ, believe in him, he will free you of your sins." If we believe this, we have it. Of this we shall say more anon. These things were done in Bethany beyond the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

43. So diligently does the Evangelist record the testimony of John, that he also mentions the places where it happened. The confession of Christ is greatly dependent on testimony, and there are many difficulties in the way. Undoubtedly, however, he wished to allude to some spiritual mystery of which we shall now speak.

## **II. THE SPIRITUAL MEANING OF THIS GOSPEL STORY.**

44. This is the sum and substance of it: In this Gospel is pictured the preacher's office of the New Testament, what it is, what it does, and what happens to it.

45. First, it is the voice of one calling, not a piece of writing. The Law and the Old Testament are dead writings, put into books, and the Gospel is to be a living voice. Therefore John is an image, and a type, and also a pioneer, the first of all preachers of the Gospel. He writes nothing, but calls out everything with his living voice.

46. Secondly, the Old Testament or the Law was preached among the tents at Mount Sinai, to the Jews alone. But John's voice is heard in the wilderness, freely and openly, under the heavens, before all the world.

47. Thirdly, it is a calling, clear and loud voice, that is to say, one that speaks boldly and undauntedly and fears no one, neither death, hell, life nor the world, neither devil, man, honor, disgrace nor any creature. Thus Isaiah says in 40, 6ff: "The voice of one saying, cry. And one said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth, but the word of our God shall stand forever." And further: "O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion, get thee up on a high mountain; lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid." The world cannot bear the Gospel, and hence there must be a strength, which scorns it and can call against it without fear.

48. Fourthly, John's raiment is of camel's hair and has a leather girdle (Mat. 3, 4). This means the strict and chaste life of preachers, but above all it points to the manner of the preachers of the Gospel. It is a voice not given to soft phrases, neither does it deal in hypocrisy and flattery. It is a sermon of the cross, a hard, rough sharp speech for the natural man, and girds the loins for spiritual and bodily chastity. This is taken from the life and words of the patriarchs of old, who like camels have borne the burden of the Law and of the cross. "*He eats locusts and wild honey.*" This means those that accept the Gospel, namely, the humble sinners, who take the Gospel unto and into themselves.

49. Fifthly, John is on the other side of the Jordan. "Jordan" really means the Holy Scriptures, which have two sides. One, the left side, is the external meaning which the Jews sought in Holy Writ; here John is not. For this interpretation does not produce sinners, but saints proud of their works. The right side is the true spiritual understanding, which discards and kills all works, in order that faith alone may remain, in all humility. This meaning is brought out in the Gospels, as St. Paul does, Rom. 3, 23, saying: "*All have sinned.*"

50. Sixthly, here begins the dispute between true and false preachers. The Pharisees cannot bear to hear John's voice, they despise his teaching and baptism, and remain obdurate in their doings and teachings. On account of the people however they pretend to think highly of him. But because he opposes their will, he must be possessed of the devil, they say, and finally he must be beheaded by Herod. So it is now and so it has

always been. No false teacher wishes it to be said of him that he preaches without or against the Gospel, but on the contrary that he thinks highly of it and believes in it. Nevertheless he does violence to it, making it conform to his meaning. This the Gospel cannot permit, for it stands firm and never lies. Then it is reviled as heresy and error, aye as a devilish doctrine. And finally they apply violence prohibiting it and striking off its head so that it may nowhere be preached or heard. This was done by the pope in the case of John Huss.

51. Thus he is a truly Christian preacher who preaches nothing but that which John proclaimed, and firmly insists upon it. First, he must preach the Law so that the people may learn what great things God demands of us; of these we cannot perform any because of the impotence of our nature which has been corrupted by Adam's fall. Then comes the baptism in Jordan. The cold water means the teaching of the Law, which does not kindle love but rather extinguishes it. For through the Law man learns how difficult and how impossible of fulfillment the Law is. Then he becomes hostile to it, and his love for it cools; he feels that he heartily hates it. This of course is a grievous sin, to be hostile to God's commands. Therefore man must humble himself, and confess that he is lost and that all his works are sins, aye, that his whole life is sinful. Herewith then John's baptism has been accomplished, and he has been, not only besprinkled, but properly baptized. Then he sees why John says, "Repent ye". He understands that John is right, and that everyone must needs become a better man and repent. But Pharisees and those holy in their works do not arrive at this knowledge, nor do they permit themselves to be baptized. They imagine that they do not need repentance, and therefore John's words and baptism are foolishness in their eyes.

52. Furthermore, when the first teaching, that of the Law, and baptism are over and man, humiliated by the knowledge of himself, is forced to despair of himself and his powers; then begins the second part of John's teaching, in which he directs the people from himself to Christ and says: "*Behold the Lamb of God that takes upon itself the sin of the world.*" By this he means to say: "*First I have, by my teaching, made you all sinners, have condemned your works and told you to despair of yourselves. But in order that you may not also despair of God, behold, I will show you how to get rid of your sins and obtain salvation. Not that you can strip off your sins or make yourselves pious through your works; another man is needed for this; nor can I do it, I can point him out, however. It is Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God. He, he, and no one else either in heaven or on earth takes our sins upon himself. You yourself could not pay for the very smallest of sins. He alone must take upon himself not alone your sins, but the sins of the world, and not some sins, but all the sins of the world, be they great or small, many or few*". This then is preaching and, hearing the pure Gospel, and recognizing the finger of John, who points out to you Christ, the Lamb of God.

53. Now, if you are able to believe that this voice of John speaks the truth, and if you are able to follow his finger and recognize the Lamb of God carrying your sin, then you have gained the victory, then you are a Christian, a master of sin, death, hell, and all things. Then your conscience will rejoice and become heartily fond of this gentle Lamb of God. Then will you love, praise, and give thanks to our heavenly Father for this infinite wealth of his mercy, preached by John and given in Christ. And finally you will become cheerful and willing to do his divine will, as best you can, with all your strength. For what lovelier and more comforting message can be heard than that our sins are not ours any more, that they no more lie on us, but on the Lamb of God. How can sin condemn such an innocent Lamb? Lying on him, it must be vanquished and made to be nothing, and likewise death and hell, being the reward of sin, must be vanquished also. Behold what God our Father has given us in Christ!

54. Take heed, therefore, take heed, I say, lest you presume to get rid of the smallest of your sins through your own merit before God, and lest you rob Christ, the Lamb of God, of his credit. John indeed demands that we grow better and repent; but that he does not mean us to grow better of ourselves and to strip off our sins by our own strength, this he declares powerfully by adding, "Behold the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world." As we have said above (§29), he means that each one is to know himself and his need of becoming a better man; yet he is not to look for this in himself, but in Jesus Christ alone. Now may God our Father according to his infinite mercy bestow upon us this knowledge of Christ, and may he send into the world the voice of John, with great numbers of evangelists! Amen.

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