

Wednesday in *Gaudete*, the Third Week of Advent
December 17, 2008

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✧ Jesu juva ✧

WORTHY TO LOOSE THE SANDAL

Psalm 19, Matthew 3:7-12

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

For the third time we encounter John the Baptist in these Wednesdays of Advent. Now in the two verses just previous to the ones that were read tonight we are told that people from all around the region were coming to John, confessing their sins, and receiving baptism at his hand. But as more people responded to his calls for repentance in preparation for the Messiah's advent, Pharisees and Sadducees, the two most prominent and most powerful sects of Judaism at the time, began to come out to him as well. And we can tell from John's words to them that he was not very pleased at their manner of coming; for when they come to his baptism, he does not welcome them with rejoicing, but rather with what sound like very harsh words. He calls them a "brood of vipers" a people who are born of the serpent not of faith in the coming Savior whose way he was preparing. And he says to them: "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not think to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones."

Who warned them? The prophets of old warned them in the same way that John was now warning the people of Israel. But these did not think they needed to repent of anything. The one group (Sadducees) didn't believe in the resurrection of the dead, and so wanted nothing more than a political Messiah (if even that); while the other group (Pharisees) thought that the Messiah would simply be a man who came as an example of righteousness and who would pat them on the back and told them "nice job keeping that law God gave you." And each of them trusted not in God's grace through Christ but in the fact that they were descended from Abraham and that therefore they must already be worthy of God's love and acceptance.

But John quickly cuts that idea to pieces. You look at your family trees and think you will be saved because you can trace them back to Abraham? "And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." The coming of the Messiah would not bring salvation to the impenitent and unbelieving, but judgment. And neither their position nor their piety about the law would rescue them.

Now if anyone could boast about position and piety, it would be John himself. Here he was, the chosen forerunner of the Messiah, anointed with the Holy Spirit even before he was born, while in his mother's womb. And what piety! He lives an ascetic life, shunning all comforts, dwelling in the wilderness. But what does John say about himself: "I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." Not only does John defer to Jesus in regard to his office and work, but also in terms of worthiness. St. Mark elaborates this statement a little: "whose sandal strap I am not worthy to stoop down and loose." John says that he is not even worthy to unlatch or

to carry Jesus' sandals. He knows he is not worthy of Christ because John knows that he, despite his high calling, anointing, and office, despite the fact that Jesus says no one greater than John has ever been born (except Himself, of course), recognizes that he still suffers from the plague that infects all humanity. John knows he is not without sin, and therefore not worthy of God's love and acceptance; not worthy of his own office as forerunner, and not worthy of Christ.

There is more to this statement about John not being worthy of loosing Jesus' sandals, however. What John says refers to an obscure reference in the book of Ruth. According to Ruth 4, whenever someone was redeeming something from another, he would take off his sandal and hand it to the other person as a sort of physical testimony as to his intentions. Now if you recall the story of Ruth, you will remember that her husband had died; so there was an obligation on the part of the husband's closest male relative to take her into his own household as a wife and to raise up children in the name of the deceased. Now when this happened to Ruth there was such a fellow who should have taken her to be his wife, but refused. So the right to do so was passed to Boaz. And to signify that Boaz was redeeming Ruth from her widowhood, he takes off his sandal, and its a done deal; Ruth becomes his wife.

What John is saying here, is that he is not able to redeem himself or anyone else from their bondage to sin. That is Christ's job alone. Only Christ is the Bridegroom and Savior of the Bride, His Church. John cannot loose Christ's sandal strap or make the necessary bargain. John is not worthy, for he himself needs to be redeemed. And here we see John's own penitence and faith. And therein we see his greatness in the eyes of Jesus.

John was right and the Pharisees and Sadducees were wrong. And so we too should heed the Baptist's call. We are called to be part of His Bride the Church, the "Ruth" that He has redeemed from sin and from death and from the power of the devil. He took of His own sandal strap so to speak when he went to the cross for her. We cannot find salvation outside of Him. For there is no one else who can do it. No one else can accomplish this because no one else is worthy. Not John, not the Pharisees, and certainly not yourselves.

If you trust in yourself, in your piety and goodness before God or in your Christian lineage; if you think yourself worthy and find in yourself nothing of which to repent; then you too will be called a brood of vipers by God, children of the devil, for you will have been deceived by him into this unbelief. Let us rather imitate the Baptist. Listening to God's Law and to the promise of Christ's return to judge; take stock of your life and own up to your own need; and even when you find nothing egregious, say with the Psalmist: "Who can understand his errors? Cleanse me from secret faults. Keep back Your servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me. Then I shall be blameless, and I shall be innocent of great transgression." For the Messiah who comes to judge, also comes to save the penitent faithful. He is our Boaz, our Bridegroom, who loves us and gave Himself for us, that we who are dirty with sin, may be presented to Him and by Him without spot or wrinkle, forgiven, cleansed and redeemed. He is our Lord, our Strength, and our Redeemer. Amen

✧ Soli Deo gloria ✧