

Matthew 3 Commentary-C H Spurgeon

PREVIOUS

NEXT

MATTHEW 3:1-12 THE HERALD OF THE KING

The King has been in concealment long enough, and it is time for his herald to appear and proclaim his coming. This chapter tells us of the champion who came in advance of the King.

Matthew 3:1-2. IN those days came John the Baptist preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

While Jesus still remained at Nazareth, his kinsman, the Baptizer, made his appearance: the morning star is seen before the sun. John came not to the court, but to lone wildernesses: places left to sheep and a handful of rural folk. The mission of Christ Jesus is to the moral wastes and to the desolate places of the earth. To them the Lord's harbinger makes his way, and there he fitly preaches the command, "Repent ye." Give up your thorns and briars, O ye wildernesses; for your Lord is coming to you! See how John announces the coming kingdom, how he bids men make ready for it, and he v he urges them to be speedy in their preparation: "For the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Let me be ready for my Lord's coming, and put away all that would grieve his Holy Spirit!

Matthew 3:3. For this is he that was spoken of by the prophet Esaias, saying The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the lord, make his paths straight.

Matthew keeps to his custom of quoting from the Old Testament. The prophets not only described the King, but his forerunner also. They mention the character of this harbinger: he was a "voice "; (Jesus is "the Word"); his tone, "crying "; his place, "in the wilderness "; and his message, which was one of announcement, in which he required preparation for the coming king: "Prepare ye the way of the Lord." Men's hearts were like a wilderness, wherein there is no way; but as loyal subjects throw up roads for the approach of beloved princes, so were men to welcome the Lord, with their hearts made right and ready to receive him.

O Lord, I would welcome thee if thou wouldst come to me. I have greet need of thy royal presence, and therefore I would prepare a way for thee.

Into my heart my desires have made for thee a path most short and smooth.

Come, Lord, and tarry not! Come into my wilderness nature and transform it into a garden of the Lord.

Matthew 3:4. And the same John had his raiment of camel's hair, and a leather girdle about his loins; and his meat was locusts and wild honey.

He was rough and stern, like Elijah. His garments betokened his simplicity, his sternness, his self-denial. His food, the product of the desert where he dwelt, showed that he cared nothing for luxuries. His whole bearing was symbolical; but it was also fit, and suitable for his office. The plainest of food is best for body and mind and spirit, and, moreover, it fosters manliness. Lord, let not my meat, or drink, or garments, hinder me in thy work!

Matthew 3:5, 6. Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judea, and all the region round about Jordan, and were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins.

The people were expecting a Messiah, and so they went en masse to John as soon as his shrill voice had startled the solitudes. Baptism, or the washing of the body in water, most fitly accompanied the cry, "Repent ye."

The "Confessing their sins" which went with baptism in Jordan gave it its meaning. Apart from the acknowledgment of guilt, it would have been a mere bathing of the person without spiritual significance; but the confession which went with it made it an instructive sign. John must have inwardly wondered to see the multitudes come; but his chief thought ran forward to his coming Lord. He thought more of him than of "all Judea."

Matthew 3:7. But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?

It was strange to see the proud Separatists and the skeptical Moralists come to be baptized; and therefore, as a test, John addressed them with scorching words. He saw that they, were serpentine in their motives and viperish in their tempers, and so he calls them "Progeny of vipers": thus would he see whether they were sincere or not. He asks who suggested to them to flee from that wrath of which he was the forerunner, according to the closing words of the Old Testament. This inquiry was not complimentary; but it is no business of the Lord's servants to make themselves pleasing: they must be faithful, and especially so to the great and learned. Thus faithful was John the Baptist, and he was honored for it by him that sent him

Matthew 3:8 Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance.

Act as a change of mind would lead you to do: above all, quit the pride in which you enwrap yourselves, and leave the serpent motives which now actuate you. Lord, save us from a fruitless repentance, which would be only an aggravation of our previous sins.

Matthew 3:9. And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham.

Do not imagine that God needs you in order to fulfill his promise to his servant Abraham; for he can make each stone in Jordan into an heir of grace. Do not presume upon your ancestry, and think that all the blessings of the coming kingdom must be yours because you are of the seed of the father of the faithful. God can as easily make sons of stones as of a generation of vipers. He will never be short of means for fulfilling his covenant, without bowing his gospel before the caprice of vainglorious men. He will find a people in the slums if his gospel is rejected by the respectable. Let none of us, because we are orthodox, or exceedingly Scriptural in our religious observances, dream that we must therefore be in the favor of God, and that we are under no necessity to repent. God can do without us; but we cannot do without repentance and the works which prove it true. What a blessing that he can transform hearts of stone into filial spirits! Wonders of grace to God belong!

Matthew 3:10. And now also the ax is laid unto the root of the trees: therefore every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire.

He means, the King is come: the Cutter-down of every fruitless tree has arrived. The Great Woodman has thrown down his ax at "the root of the trees." He lifts the ax; he strikes; the fruitless tree is felled; it is cast into the fire. The sketch is full of life. The Baptizer sees forests falling beneath the ax; for he whom he heralds will be the Judge of men, and the Executioner of righteousness. What an announcement he had to make! What a scene his believing eye beheld! Our vision is much the same: the ax is still at work.

Lord, cut me not down for the fire. I know that the absence of good fruit is as fatal as the presence of corrupt fruit: Lord, let me not be a mere negative, lest I be "hewn down, and cast into the fire."

Matthew 3:11. I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire.

John could plunge the penitent into water; but a greater than he must baptize men into the Holy Ghost and into fire. Repentance is

well attended by washing in water; but the true baptism of the believer by the Lord Jesus himself brings us into spiritual floods of holy fire. John considered himself to be nothing more than a household slave, unworthy of the office of removing his Master's sandals; and his baptism in water was as much inferior to the Spirit-baptism as a slave to his lord. Jesus is the divine Lord who covers us with the fiery influences of the Holy Spirit. Do we know this baptism? What is water-baptism without it? What are all the Johns in the world, with their baptisms in water, when compared with Jesus and his baptism into fire!

Matthew 3:12. Whose fan is in his hand and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.

He sets forth his Lord under another figure; that of a Husbandman. This time he holds in his hand, not the ax, but the winnowing shovel. Pharisees, Sadducees, and all the rest, lie on his floor: it is with them he deals: "He will thoroughly purge his floor." If they do not wish to be purified by him, they should not be there: but there they are, and he deals with them. His fan is in his hand: he throws up the heap to the breeze, that he may test and divide. His wheat he gathers; for this he seeks. The chaff is blown further off to the place where a fire is burning, and so it is consumed out of the way by what he tells us is unquenchable fire. Our Lord's teaching would act like a great winnowing fan, leaving the true by themselves, and driving off the false and worthless to utter destruction. It was so in the life of our Lord; it is so every day where he is preached. He is the Great Divider. It is his Word which separates the sinners from the saints, and gathers out a people for himself.

Thus the herald prepared the people for the King, who would be the Cleanser, the Hearer, the Winnower. My soul, behold thy Lord under these aspects, and reverence him!

MATTHEW 3:13-17 THE KING DESIGNATED AND ANOINTED

It was meet that there should be some public recognition of the King; some pointing of him out by truthful witness among men, and some indication from the Father in heaven that he was indeed his beloved Son.

Matthew 3:13. Then cometh Jesus from Galilee to Jordan unto John, to be baptized of him.

In due time, when all was prepared, the Prince quitted his obscurity.

Putting himself in a lowly place, he did not summon the Baptizer to come to the Lake of Galilee, but went down the country along the banks of the Jordan to him, seeking baptism. Should any of the servants neglect what their Lord so heartily attended to? Do any say, "It is not essential"? Was it essential to our Lord Jesus? He said, "It becometh us" and what was becoming in him is not unbecoming in his followers. If it should cost us a journey, let us attend to the command which is binding on all believers.

Matthew 3:14. But John forbad him, saying, I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me?

This was very natural. John knew Jesus to be eminently more holy than himself, and therefore he protested against appearing to be his purifier.

John was strong in this protest: he "forbad him": it seemed to him to be out of order for him to baptize one so supremely good. Although he was not yet assured from heaven that Jesus was the Messiah (for he had not yet seen the Spirit descending and resting upon him), yet he shrewdly guessed that Jesus was indeed the Christ. He knew him to be a very special favorite of heaven, superior to himself, and he therefore expected that sign by which he had been assured the Christ would be known.

John never shirked a duty, but he declined an honor. He would not even seem to be of any consequence as compared with his Lord. Blessed Jesus, teach us like humility!

Matthew 3:15. And Jesus answering said unto him, Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us

to fulfill all righteousness. Then he suffered him.

Jesus answered John so completely, that he ceased his opposition at once.

It was becoming both in John and in Jesus that our Lord should be baptized of him. This assurance satisfied the Baptist so far that, still under protest, "he suffered him." Baptism was becoming even in our Lord, who needed no personal purification; for he was the Head over all things to his Church, and it was becoming that he should be as the members should be.

Baptism beautifully sets forth our Lord's immersion in suffering, his burial, and his resurrection. Thus typically, it fulfills "all righteousness." The ordinance is most full of meaning when rightly observed; and it is to be most reverently regarded, since our Lord himself submitted to it. Shall I refuse to follow my Lord? Shall I think that there is nothing in an ordinance of which he said, "Thus it cometh us to fulfill all righteousness?"

Matthew 3:16, 17. And Jesus, when he was baptized went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him: and lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.

Our Lord went down into the water, for "he went up out of the water." He did not tarry, in he had fulfilled the river; but when one duty he straightway went on his way to carry out another. In Baptism, our Lord was openly attested and sealed as the "beloved Son", both by the Word of God, and the Spirit of God. What more witness is needed? It is often so with his people: their sonship is made clear during an act of obedience, and the Word and the Spirit bear witness with their consciences.

Our Lord Jesus had now to enter on his public life-work, and he did so in the best manner. The world was opening before him, "and the heavens were opened unto him." As his need appeared, his source of supply was set open before him. On him also the divine anointing descended. Like a swift-winged, pure, and quiet dove, "the Spirit of God" came, and found a resting-place in him. When he had been immersed into the element of water, he was immediately surrounded by the divine element of the Spirit.

Then, also, was his ear charmed with the Father's audible acknowledgment of him, and with the expression of that good pleasure which the Lord God had always felt in him. It was a glorious moment. Our King was now proclaimed and anointed. Would not his next step be to take the Kingdom?

We shall see.

Our Lord and King is now fully before us. He has been preceded, predicted, and pointed out by John the Baptist; he has been dedicated to his work in baptism; he has been anointed by the Spirit, and confessed by the Father; and therefore he has fairly entered upon his royal work. May none of us in the service of the Lord run before our time, or go forward without a sense of the Father's approval, and without that spiritual unction which is from above!

O my Lord, let me be anointed and approved in my measure, even as thou wast in shine. In order to this, I would behold shine anointing of the Spirit with the full belief that I am anointed in thee, as the body receives unction in the anointing of the Head.