

February 4, 2009
Class Notes/John the Baptist

We read the four Gospel accounts of John the Baptist and discussed the significance of his ministry to prepare the way for Jesus. He lived in the wilderness, baptized people in the river Jordan, preaching repentance for the coming Judgment and had his own followers. John the writer of the 4th Gospel and one of Jesus' 12 disciples was originally a follower of John.

Read Mark Chapter 1:1-11. Mark says that John is important in that his mission fulfills the scripture that announces a voice in the wilderness. John proclaims a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Then God forgives those who repent. John also insisted that those repenting must also be baptized. In Jewish life, this connection between baptism and forgiveness was new. Mark's Gospel clearly shows that John is the forerunner whose mission is to prepare the way for Jesus.

Read Matthew Chapter 3. Matthew clearly states the theme of John's preaching "Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near". Matthew also uses exactly the same words to state the theme of Jesus' preaching. In doing so he aligns John and Jesus much more closely than Mark. John is clearly the forerunner of Jesus as he anticipates Jesus' message. Matthew also claims John fulfills the words of Isaiah. Matthew reports that John attacks "many Pharisees and Sadducees (Jesus eventual opponents) who come to be baptized. John denounces them for thinking that by confessing sin and being baptized they will be saved from the Judgment. What is really required is "fruit worthy of repentance", the results in a changed life. Repentance is not sorrow for having sinned or regret for getting caught at it, but turning ones' life around. In other words, John insisted that the repentance he called for meant changing the way one lived. Jesus affirms John's mission "John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him....". Jesus answer to John's question "Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?" is interesting. John expects the Messiah to bring "fiery Judgment" and Jesus mission has a different character. He challenges John to see his mission as fulfilling Isaiah 29:18-19 and 35:5-6 at the time of salvation. He says that blessed are those who are not offended by what he does and says—that the expected one does not bring what is expected.

Read Luke 1:5-17, 67-80, 3:1-22 Luke starts with Zechariah who had foreseen his son "as the prophet Most High". Luke starts the account of John's mission by saying "The word of God came to John", words often used for biblical prophets. Like Mathew and Mark, Luke sees John's mission as fulfillment of the prophesies of Isaiah. John's mission begins the time of salvation and almost all of John's preaching is aimed at repentance in anticipation of the impending Judgment. Remember that Luke's Gospel is written for the Gentiles, those without a foundation in the Old Testament. Repentance is not just saying that you are sorry, but changing your behavior. He spends more time explaining how exactly people should repent "those who have must share with those who have nothing...", etc.

Read John 6-18, 19-34 John's Gospel treats John the Baptist as significant only in that he points the way to Jesus. He is never referred in this Gospel as "the Baptist" or "the Baptizer". Though "sent from God" like a prophet, he is not to be confused with the light (Jesus) because his role is to witness to the light, to say who Jesus is and why he is decisively significant..."one who is more powerful than I is coming after me". He says directly that he is not the messiah, or Elijah (remember in the Old Testament that the prophet Elijah was supposed to come back before the Messiah returns) or the prophet. But he does say that he is the "voice in the wilderness of who Isaiah spoke. He announces Jesus-- "among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me: I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal".