

“Truth still matters” Luke 3:7-18

He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” And the crowds asked him, “What then shall we do?” And he answered them, “Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise.” Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, “Teacher, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Collect no more than you are authorized to do.” Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation and be content with your wages.” As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, John answered them all, saying, “I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people.

Is it important to speak the truth? I would say it is very, very important, for the truth is what corresponds to how things truly are in this world. Do you think that people today care much about speaking truthfully?

Interesting thing this our language, if we think about it. When we speak, the words that we hear, it is not simply about receiving some kind of information. Often words that we hear move us to actions.

What we hear may change how we think about important life matters, it may move us to make certain decisions and choices, or to change what we do, it may move us to do something we haven't done before and so on.

Put it simply, – words and language not only deliver information, they actually do things, they have direct impact on our lives. Now, think about it once more, is it important to speak and to hear the truth? O yes!

For if you hear the truth then you can adjust your thinking and life accordingly. If you hear lies, false teachings, manipulations with words, they will still shape your thinking and life accordingly... but in a way that doesn't correspond to the reality and so will do harm to you.

It was funny to hear about lawsuits against McDonalds or tobacco companies, when people claimed that they had been misled in their thinking, which had led to unexpected bad consequences. They demanded millions in compensations.

For a minute picture, how many people could fail lawsuits against the Church, against us, once they face the holy God and all the unexpected consequences that

they will inevitably face, because they hadn't heard the truth about our responsibility before God, about sin, about Jesus, about salvation, etc.

They may complain: "But no one told us that it was so serious, no one warned us that we will be held accountable. If only we knew, we would have lived differently." But it will be too late...

How grateful should we be that we have our Father in heaven, who doesn't hesitate to send us His messengers, who are ready to suffer even rejection and persecution, so that only they can tell us the truth. The most important truth.

John the Baptist was one of them. How much he cared about the eternal fate of his fellow countrymen, that he was ready to use the language that would inevitably cause frustration and even aggression in his listeners. So that only the message of truth would be heard.

"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits in keeping with repentance." Interesting, he says this to the crowds who already came to him. Isn't this an unusual way to engage people who have come to be baptized? Why would John do that?

Because there is a huge difference whether people just want to get something from God, be it a blessing, or a protection, or something else (and not so long ago I happen to be one of such people), or whether people genuinely are looking for the true God, willing to become disciples of Jesus. The difference is as great as between the "brood of vipers" and between the "children of God".

And those who respond to God's invitation, who are ready to follow Jesus, they receive more than they could possibly imagine. The Father welcomes them with open arms, Jesus pours over them His unconditional love, and the Holy Spirit dwells in them, as a guarantee of the promised inheritance in the age to come.

But one can rightly object, – how can we know whether someone comes with genuine desire to follow Jesus, or simply led by their own ideas. Very good question. And John gives us the answer right here.

Bear fruits in keeping with repentance! Remember, what was the meaning of the word repentance? Picture that one in walking away from the true God, wandering further and further away from home. Then he hears the Father's call to turn back and to come home to the Father's house, where we truly belong.

This is what repentance means. This is why John demands the fruits of repentance. This turning around, this change of direction should be visible in our life. It's simple. No one can't say that they repent, receive the Holy Spirit, but still keep living as before, ignoring the Triune God and His design for our lives.

The fruits of repentance are first seen in our relationships with our God. When instead of avoiding Jesus, urged by God's Spirit we search for opportunities to be with Him. When instead of us wandering in the world, the Holy Spirit brings us to join God's family, the Church, where the Triune God Himself gathers us to be with us and to bless us. When instead of doing whatever is good in our own eyes, the

Holy Spirit creates in us the desire to listen to our God as He speaks to us in His Word, to learn His wisdom and to strive to do what pleases Him.

“And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.”

This is another very important thing to remember. It is not enough for someone to claim that they have the right connections. Or the right surname, or ancestry.

We all want to use our connections and names that we know to advance our causes, to get what we want. Who haven't done it?! I definitely have. And it works in this world. John, however, remains unyielding to such claims.

Either you bear fruit keeping with repentance, or ... no one will be able to help you. **“Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”**

Here we again have people compared with fruit trees. It is a very telling metaphor. Why are fruit trees planted? With the main purpose of – bearing good fruit. And if they don't, it's simple. They are cut down and thrown into fire.

People are like fruit trees, our God is the Gardener, He has planted each one of us and He keeps providing everything that we need, and He expects us to bear good fruits, and John the Baptist explains how to bear these good fruits.

When people, who wanted to bear fruit keeping with repentance, asked **“What then shall we do”**, John basically told them two things. Be generous and be faithful in your callings, in your vocations.

Be generous. Appreciate what the Lord has given to you, be grateful, be joyful, but don't put your trust in created things. Do not hope that having much will make your future secure.

Every good gift is given to us to use them with gratitude for our sake, and for the sake of those in need, whom God has put in our lives. So bear fruit by being generous with what is entrusted to you.

Then, be faithful in your callings. To follow Jesus doesn't mean to leave our current professions and to take up something more spiritual. Not at all. All our callings, all our professions that serve the interests of our neighbors are fit for Christians.

However, our calling should be exactly that, – our service to our neighbors, not our service to ourselves by abusing our authority or neglecting our responsibilities. Let's serve faithfully to our neighbors, for this is how we serve your God.

As John the Baptist was thus teaching the crowds, they began to wonder, whether he might be the Christ. John answered: **“I baptize you with water, but He who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”** John was very devout to his

ministry. He didn't pull punches, for he wanted people to know the truth and to re-organize their lives accordingly. And his devotedness didn't go unnoticed.

Many begun to wander, – maybe he is the One? Sure, when someone speaks to you truthfully, wakes you up and demands to get your stuff in order, you may think that he is someone special. In a way he was, for as Jesus said: “No one born of women is greater than John”.

However, the whole program of John was not simply about making people repentant and encouraging them to bring forth the fruit of repentance. His main focus was to lead us to Someone infinitely greater than John.

Jesus from Nazareth is His name, the strap of whose sandals John didn't consider himself worthy to untie. Such humility, such reverence before Jesus! God's love was seen in John when he didn't shy away from speaking the truth, even if it meant to suffer rejection.

In Jesus God's love shines infinitely brighter, He not only came speaking the truth, He came to lay down His life in the most painful of ways, so that only we could learn how much our God loves us and how much He is ready to suffer for us.

John baptized with water. Remember, that “to baptize” means to cleanse, to purify. Jesus baptizes with the Holy Spirit and fire. Water can cleanse our bodies. But it's not enough for us. Our problem goes much deeper.

It is not only what we do, – it is about what makes us to think, to say and to do things that are so contrary to God's will for our lives. It is – about our very hearts. Our sinful hearts.

Our very being needs to be cleansed, purified from all evil desire, our hearts need to be created anew. And this is the job that Jesus is up for. He comes in the power of the Creator. He is the Creator. He sends forth His Spirit to make a new thing.

He comes to restore His creations beginning with His little, rebellious and stubborn creatures, that is, us. He begins by gently speaking to us and inviting us. But when this age is over, those who despised and rejected His gracious offer, “the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire.”

This life is given to us to learn the truth and to respond to God's grace. For He desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. This is the truth that is entrusted to the Church. ‘Repent, receive a new heart, be filled with God's own Spirit and bear much fruit walking with Jesus!’

We are so blessed to have heard the truth, and to be able to reflect on it and to be reminded of it. For the truth about us and about our gracious God helps us to re-organize our lives, it helps us to be fruitful trees and to bear God-pleasing fruit.

This is the truth that the world needs to hear. Before it's too late. The truth matters. It does. May the One, who Himself is the truth and the way and the life, fills us with His Spirit so that we can share the truth about Him with our loved ones, so that the Truth can create new hearts in them and to lead them to eternal life. Amen.