

I am not worthy to carry his sandals

Isaiah 11:1–10

Psalm 72:1–7, 18–19

Romans 15:4–13

Matthew 3:1–12

Text: Matthew 3:11

‘I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

Introduction

It seems to me that every field of human endeavour has its stars, people who excel above the rest. Sports is an obvious example; you know who the stars are by counting the number of fans with the name of that player on the back of the team jersey they wear. It is true in other fields. I can tell you who I consider great preachers. I am sure Sarah call tell us who she considers great pianists. I recall fondly, on a trip to Rome, seeing the work of the great sculptor and architect Gain Lorenzo Bernini. One scholar [commented](#), “What Shakespeare is to drama, Bernini may be to sculpture.” At St. Peter’s Basilica Bernini created the Baldacchino; the gold and bronze canopy that stands at the centre of St. Peter’s over the altar. But the one that really caught my eye was a work called the [Tomb of Pope Alexander VII](#). Even for someone like me, who knows nothing about sculpting, this piece was so impressive I walked away thinking ‘this guy is in a league all by himself.’

1. When Matthew describes the work of John the Baptist he does so in such a way as to indicate that John was, in many respects, in a league all by himself. By the time Matthew writes his gospel John is considered a great prophet. Matthew tells us that “John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist.” Matthew includes this detail, not because he wants to say that John had wardrobe issues. Rather, he wants to link John directly with an older testament prophet with similar taste in clothes, Elijah. (1 Kings 1:8) Elijah was considered the greatest of the older testament prophets; he is the one who founded the school of prophets and gives Israel its preachers. Matthew wants to indicate, what Jesus stated openly, (Matthew 11:14) that John is the one like Elijah whom the prophet Malachi said would come. (Malachi 4:5)

But the line that ought to catch our attention about the impact of John as a preacher/prophet is this one: “Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan.” Skeptics may read this and think that Matthew is using hyperbole for emphasis or effect, like when we say, “I’ve got a million things to do today.” If we set our skepticism aside for a moment, it is clear from the accounts of Matthew, Mark, and Luke that they intend us to understand that John’s ministry was having a significant impact. People were streaming to hear him.

Now while we don’t need to have outside historical corroboration to know the truth the scriptures declare it is interesting to learn that John the Baptist caught the attention of the first-century Roman-Jewish historian Josephus. In his massive work titled *The Antiquities Of The Jews*, a history of Israel beginning at creation to present day, Josephus tells the story of John the Baptist and his death at the hands of Herod. Josephus says he was a good man and even includes a description of the general contours of his preaching. He wrote, “when many others came to crowd about him, for they were greatly moved by hearing his words, Herod who feared less the great influence John had over the people might put it in his power an inclination to raise a rebellion... though it best to put him to death.”¹ The gospel writers weren’t the only first-century people who thought John to be very influential.

Now why do I point out John’s greatness—the fact that he stands out as head and shoulders above the prophets of his own day. Why do I ask you to consider John’s influence to be in the same league with the great Elijah? I do so because, for all his greatness, John said of Jesus, “I am not worthy to carry his sandals.” Matthew wants you to see this. His comparison of John and Jesus in his gospel is striking. The core of their message was the same, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Both are opposed by Pharisees and Sadducees. Both appeal to the same generation to repent. Both act by the same authority, the authority of heaven. Both are taken by the people to be prophets. Both are rejected and executed as criminals. And both are buried by their own disciples. And even though these similarities exist, the difference couldn’t be more striking. Of Jesus, John said, “I am not worthy to carry his sandals.”

The Apostle Paul was also a standout among peers. When you read his writings the massiveness of his intellect becomes apparent. His influence on the church, and through the church the history of the Western world, cannot be calculated.

¹ Antiquities, xviii, v, 2.

The Corinthian Church that Paul founded thought themselves to excel in knowledge; Paul said they had indeed been enriched in speech and knowledge of every kind. But, Paul noted, Christ sent me “to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.” (1 Corinthians 1:17) Paul certainly had a command of ‘eloquent wisdom.’ Instead Paul said he had but one sermon in his filing cabinet, “Jesus Christ and him crucified.” (1 Corinthians 2:2)

Think about Mary the sister of Martha and Lazarus. She stands out among the followers of Jesus as one devoted to his teaching; devoted to listening to Jesus. And also for her love of Jesus. At that evening meal at her home that was given in honour of Jesus; keep in mind that Lazarus was at the meal after our Lord raised him from the dead. It was there that Mary’s heart is bursting with her affection for Jesus and she can’t wait any longer. She goes and gets the expensive perfume she was keeping for Jesus’ burial and she kneels down and pours it over his feet wiping them with her hair. And the fragrance filled the room, indeed the fragrance of her love.

Why is it that all these people forget themselves, abandon themselves, wanting nothing else but Jesus Christ? This is what the gospel writers want us to see. Jesus Christ. Whatever else we are chasing in life, nothing compares to knowing him. The prophet Isaiah, seeing Jesus in the future, said of him, “A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.” Jesus Christ is why Christmas ought to be, for us, a great celebration.

Can we confess with John, “I am not worthy to carry his sandals.” Be careful to note that John isn’t saying, ‘I’m worthless.’ If he thought that, why does he preach? No. He simply knows that Jesus Christ is incomparable. Great skill in a particular field of endeavour, giant intellect, and even the profoundest love can’t guarantee anyone life forever more; but Jesus Christ can. Neither can these things, alone or in combination, finally render life meaningful; but Jesus Christ does. It also appears to me, in the lives of these people, that knowing Jesus calls from them the very best of who they are. And, by extension, it would be the same for any who put their faith in Him.

2. We read today from Psalm 72, “Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who alone does wondrous things. Blessed be his glorious name for ever; may his glory fill the whole earth. Amen and Amen.” In our reading from the Apostle Paul today

we read Paul's remarks where he is concluding a section that probes what it means to love one another. Paul writes, "Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ welcomed you, for the glory of God."

In the scripture the glory of God is a huge category. Theologian Karl Barth said that "Glory is the self-revealing sum of all divine perfections."² The glory of God is the simultaneity of all God's perfections: his grace and holiness, mercy and righteousness, patience and wisdom, unity and omnipresence, constancy and omnipotence, eternity. The beauty of God, is a subset of the glory of God, God's glory as loveable. And because of that it is irresistible. When a person falls in love the one they love is irresistible to them. This is what apprehending the glory of God and his beauty is like. It renders Jesus irresistible. In John's gospel Jesus said "I am the good shepherd." The word he used that we translate as 'good' (kalos) is a Greek word that means, lovely, loveable, attractive, compelling, winsome. What else could account for the self-forgetting devotion to Jesus of John the Baptist, the Apostle Paul, and Mary?

I cited the Theologian Karl Barth a moment ago. He is one of those very talented people who comes along once every couple of hundred years and changes the landscape of the field in which a person works. What I enjoy about his writing is his devotion to Jesus Christ. He wants to submit everything he does to the revelation that is Jesus. He endeavours to think according to gospel patterns being careful not to import any philosophy that might send him off course from Jesus Christ. Thomas Torrance, an excellent Scottish theologian, though he was critical of Barth at points (none agree with everything in each other); Torrance said that when he reads Barth's writing about God he finds that the only response is to fall to his knees and worship God.

Barth said that God is one who loves in freedom. Freedom, scripturally speaking, isn't what we typically associate as freedom', the ability to choose whatever we want. Freedom, in the Bible, is that nothing inner or outer impedes God in being who he is. Freedom is that nothing impedes or constrains acting in accord with a person's true nature. We humans are not free but captive to sin which distorts our humanity. But God is love and nothing inner or outer impedes God from being who he is. God loves in freedom. God did not have to create humans. He did not need us to complete himself in any way. The triune God loves each other in this freedom. That God chose from before the foundation of the world to be for us is God's free love manifesting itself. We have no right or claim to existence. It is all

² CD II.1.643

sheer grace. God is not free to choose whatever he wants. Such a god could never be trusted. Because God is love, and nothing inner or outer can impede God being who God is, he cannot not love.

The Psalmist prays in wonder, ‘who is the human that you are mindful of them?’ It is nothing in us. It is a manifestation of the glory God. John is correct about Jesus, “I am not worthy to carry his sandals.

3. Perhaps some of John’s preaching causes people to winch a little. He spoke to the Pharisees and Sadducees as a ‘brood of vipers’ yet still thinks that they can bear fruit worthy of repentance. Jesus said scorched-earth things as well. In Matthew chapter 13 we can read his denunciation of the scribes and Pharisees. Even so Nicodemus, a Pharisee, comes to believe. You notice the theme of judgement that is in John’s preaching. He said of Jesus, the one Isaiah said would come to judge, “His winnowing-fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

Some will know that as John the Baptist is in Herod’s prison, he sends an envoy to Jesus to ask if he was the Messiah. Jesus answered ‘Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.’ (Matthew 11:4-6) John, in prison, wonders about judgement, about things being set to rights. I invite you to understand Jesus’ response, regarding his current his work, as the gathering of his wheat into the granary; final judgement will come.

The glory of God, according to John’s gospel, paradoxically, is seen in the cross. (John 12) It is on the cross that we see who God is most characteristically in all his glory. It is as Father and Son take upon themselves the just judgment of our sin. Amnesty is available to any who would believe in him. This glory of God at the cross is not naturally recognizable. A naked and beaten Jew nailed to the wood at the city garbage dump doesn’t look like much. The fact that you apprehend this to be the glory of God, that you somehow see that it is God’s love poured out for you is a work of God in your heart.

I trust that enough has been said today that we might, with John, confess the glory of Jesus, “I am not worthy to carry his sandals.”