

Historic Commentary

(Baptism of Our Lord - Year B)



The Liturgy Letter

Commentary on Mark 1:4-11 from Selected Church Fathers and John Calvin

[Thomas Aquinas' curated commentary on Mark 1](#), from a 13th century document called the [Catena Aurea](#) that contains compiled verse by verse commentary on the Gospels from the patristics and others.

[Tertullian](#): John called for the baptism of repentance to prepare the way for the Lord. He himself led in that way by means of the sign and seal of repentance for all whom God was calling through grace to inherit the promise surely made to Abraham.... He called us to purge our minds of whatever impurity error had imparted, whatever contamination ignorance had engendered, which repentance would sweep and scour away, and cast out. So prepare the home of your heart by making it clean for the Holy Spirit. Those who sought the baptism of repentance were dealt with as if candidates preparing for the baptismal remission and sanctification that were soon to follow in the ministry of Christ. When John preached baptism for “the remission of sins,” the declaration was made with reference to a future remission. If so, John’s call to repentance is to lead the way, and actual remission is to follow. This is what is meant by “preparing the way.” But one who prepares does not himself perfect, but rather makes ready for another to perfect.

[Cyprian](#): The Lord was baptized by his servant. The holy One who was destined to grant remission of sins did not himself disdain to submit his body to be cleansed with the water of regeneration.

[Chrysostom](#): Since the Victim had not been offered, nor had the Holy Spirit yet descended, of what kind was this remission of sins?... Fittingly therefore, when he had said that he came “preaching the baptism of repentance,” he adds, “for the remission of sins”; as if to say: he persuaded them to repent of their sins, so that later they might more easily receive pardon through believing in Christ. For unless brought to it by repentance, they would not seek for pardon. His baptism therefore served no other end than as a preparation for belief in Christ.

[Jerome](#): The baptism of John did not so much consist in the forgiveness of sins as in being a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins, that is, for a future remission, which was to follow through the sanctification of Christ.

Clement of Alexandria: The blessed John disdained hair obtained from flocks of sheep as smelling of luxury. Instead he chose camel's hair, making his life's pattern one of simplicity and frugality. For he also "ate locusts and wild honey," sweet and spiritual food, preparing for the humble and self-controlled ways of the Lord. How could John have possibly worn a purple robe? He was one who avoided all false pretenses of the city and lived a calm existence in the desert apart from all frivolous pursuits, from anything ignoble or mean.

Jerome: John the Baptist had a religious mother and his father was a priest. Yet neither his mother's affection nor his father's affluence could induce him to live in his parents' house at the risk of the world's temptations. So he lived in the desert. Seeking Christ with his eyes, he refused to look at anything else. His rough garb, his girdle made of skins, his diet of locusts and wild honey were all alike designed to encourage virtue and continence. Later the spiritual descendants of the prophets, who were the monks of the Old Testament, would build for themselves huts by the waters of Jordan and forsaking the crowded cities live in these on pottage and wild herbs. As long as you are at home, make your cell your paradise, gather there the varied fruits of Scripture, let them be your favorite companions, and take its precepts to your heart.

Venerable Bede: He esteemed the high priestly garment woven of gold cloth of less value than a garment made of camel's hair, girded with a leather belt. Why? Was it not that he who, by reason of a more perfect justice, had received for himself authority to preach, that he might show, even by the neglect of his ancestral right to the high priesthood, how certainly he was the herald and precursor of a more excellent high priesthood?

Chrysostom: You may ask, why did he wear a leather girdle?... Elijah also was so clothed, and likewise many others among holy men, either because they were engaged in heavy labor, or were upon a journey, or in any other necessity that involved labor, and because they despised ornament, and followed an austere way of life.... Let us, putting away all excess, and drinking the healthy cup of moderation, live in a manner that is becoming and temperate. Let us give ourselves in earnest to prayer. And if we do not receive that for which we pray, let us persevere that we may receive it. And if we do receive it, then let us persevere all the more for what we have received. For it is not his will to withhold the gift we ask for, but in his wisdom, to encourage our perseverance by delaying it.

Jerome: John, too, wears a leather girdle about his loins; and there was nothing soft or effeminate in Elijah, but every bit of him was hard and virile. He, too, certainly was a shaggy man.

Chrysostom: It was necessary that the precursor of the One who was to undo the age-long burdens of men, such as toil, malediction, pain and sweat, should in his own person give some token of the gifts to come, so as to stand above these tribulations. And so it was that he neither tilled the earth, nor plowed the furrow, nor did he eat bread of his own sweat, for his table was easily prepared, and his clothing more easily than his table, and his dwelling more easily than his clothing. For he had need neither of roof, nor bed, nor table, nor any such thing. But even while still within this flesh of ours he lived an almost angelic

life. His clothing was put together from the hair of camels, so that even from his garments he might teach us that we free ourselves of human needs, and need not be bound to this earth, but that we may return to the pristine dignity in which Adam first lived, before he had need of garments or of clothing.

Cyril of Jerusalem: He fed on locusts to make his soul grow wings. Sated with honey, the words he spoke were sweeter than honey and of more profit. Clothed in a garment of camel's hair, he exemplified in his own person the holy life.... For every snake puts off its signs of age by pushing through some narrow place, and gets rid of its old apparel by squeezing it off. From then on it is young again in body. So "enter in at the straight and narrow gate," squeeze yourself through by fasting, break yourself away from perishing, "put off the old nature with its deeds."

Ambrose: Neither repentance avails without grace, nor grace without repentance; for repentance must first condemn sin, that grace may blot it out. So then John, who was a type of the law, came baptizing for repentance, while Christ came to offer grace.

Jerome: As he himself bodily preceded Christ as his forerunner, so also his baptism was the prologue to the Lord's baptism.

Jerome: "One mightier than I is coming after me, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie." The meaning of the words: "He must increase, I must decrease," 24 is that the gospel must increase, but I, the law, must decrease. John, that is, the law in John, was clothed, therefore, in the hair of a camel, for he could not wear a tunic of the lamb of whom it is said: "Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world;" and again: "He is led like a lamb to the slaughter."26 In the law, we cannot wear a tunic from that Lamb.

Augustine: John therefore was a foreteller of Christ, nearer to him in time than all who went before him. And because all the righteous ones and prophets of former times desired to see the fulfillment of what, through the revelation of the Spirit, they foresaw should come to pass—so also the Lord himself says that "many prophets and righteous men have desired to see those things which you see, and have not seen them; and to hear those things which you hear, and have not heard them." Therefore it was said of John that he was more than a prophet, and that among all that were born of women there was none greater than he, because to the righteous who went before him it was only granted to foretell the coming of Christ, but to John it was given both to foretell him in his absence and to behold him in his presence, so that it should be found that to him was made manifest what the others had desired.

Chrysostom: John was setting forth the anticipatory and ancillary value of his own baptism, showing that it had no other purpose than to lead to repentance. He did not say he baptized with water of forgiveness, but of repentance. He pointed toward Christ's baptism, full of inexpressible gifts. John seems to be saying: "On being told that he comes after me, you must not think lightly of him because he comes later. When you understand the power of Christ's gift, you will see that I said nothing lofty or noble when I said 'I am

unworthy to untie the thong of his sandal.’ When you hear, ‘He is mightier than I,’ do not imagine that I said this by way of comparison. For I am not worthy to be ranked so much as among Christ’s servants, no, not even the lowest of his servants, nor to receive the least honored portion of his ministry.” Therefore John did not simply say, “his sandals,” he said “the thong of his sandals,” the part counted the least of all.

Basil the Great: The baptism which was handed down through Moses recognized, first, a distinction among sins, for the grace of pardon was not accorded all transgressions. It also required various sacrifices, laid down precise rules for purification, and segregated for a time those who were in a state of impurity and defilement. It appointed the observance of days and seasons, and only then baptism was received as the seal of purification. The baptism of John was far more excellent: It recognized no distinction of sins, nor did it require a variety of sacrifices, nor did it appoint strict rules for purification or any observance of days or seasons. Indeed, with no delay at all, anyone who had confessed his sins, however numerous or grave, had access at once to the grace of God and his Christ.

The baptism of the Lord, however, surpasses all human powers of comprehension. It contains a glory beyond all that humanity hopes or prays for, a preeminence of grace and power which exceeds the others more than the sun outshines the stars. More than this, if the words of the righteous are recalled to mind, they prove even more conclusively its incomparable superiority. Yet, we must not therefore refrain from speaking of it, but, using the very utterances of our Lord Jesus Christ as our guides, we grope along the way, as with a mirror, or through the maze of an enigma. We must speak, not so as to diminish the greatness of the subject, by an exposition made in weakness of body and with the aid of a form of reasoning that is set at naught. We must speak to magnify the greatness and the long-suffering benevolence of the good God in tolerating our stammering attempts to speak about the prodigies of his love and grace in Christ Jesus.

John Calvin:

Preaching the baptism of repentance

This form of expression shows first, generally, what is the right use of the Sacraments; and next, why baptism was instituted, and in what it consists. A sacrament, then, is not a dumb ceremony, exhibiting some unmeaning pomp without doctrine; but the Word of God is joined to it, and gives life to the outward ceremony. By the Word I mean, not mutterings of a magical character, made by some exorcist between his teeth, but what is pronounced with a clear and distinct voice, and leads to the edification of faith. For we are not simply told, that John baptized unto repentance, as if the grace of God were contained in a visible sign; but that he explained, in his preaching, the advantage of baptism, that the sign, through the word preached, might produce its effect. This is the peculiarity of baptism, that it is said to be an outward representation of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Now, as the meaning, power, and nature of that baptism are the same as ours, if we judge of the figure from its true import, it is incorrect to say, that the baptism of John is different from the baptism of Christ.

Next follows in the words of the prophet, The voice of one crying That voice is contrasted with the temporary silence, which I have just mentioned: for the Jews were to be

deprived, for a time, of the instruction, which they had wickedly despised. The word wilderness is here used metaphorically for desolation, or the frightful ruin of the nation, such as existed in the time of the captivity. It was so dismally shattered, that it might well be compared to a wilderness. The prophet magnifies the grace of God. "Though the people," says he, "have been driven far from their country, and even excluded from the society of men, yet the voice of God will yet be heard in the wilderness, to revive the dead with joyful consolation." When John began to preach, Jerusalem was in this sense a wilderness: for all had been reduced to wild and frightful confusion. But the very sight of a visible wilderness must have had a powerful effect on stupid and hardened men, leading them to perceive that they were in a state of death, and to accept the promise of salvation, which had been held out to them. We now see, that this prediction actually relates to John, and is most properly applied to him.

Prepare the way of the Lord

The prophet undoubtedly addresses Cyrus and the Persians, whose agency the Lord employed in this matter. The meaning is: by his wonderful power, God will open a way to his people through impassable forests, through broken rocks, through a sandy desert; for he will have at hand the ministers of his grace, to remove all hindrances out of the way. But that was a shadowy anticipation of redemption. When the spiritual truth is about to appear, John is sent to remove obstacles. And even now the same voice sounds in our ears, that we may prepare the way of the Lord: that is, that we may take out of the way those sins which obstruct the kingdom of Christ, and thus may give access to his grace. To the same purpose are the following words of the prophet: the crooked shall be made straight, (Isaiah 40:4.) All that they mean is: there are intricate and crooked windings in the world, but through such appalling difficulties the Lord makes a way for himself, and breaks through, by incredible means, to accomplish our salvation.

Mark 1:5. And were baptized, confessing their sins

This confession was a testimony of repentance: for, as the Lord, in the sacraments, brings himself under obligation to us, as if he had given his own hand-writing, so it is our duty, on the other hand, to reply to him. In Baptism, he declares that our sins are forgiven, and calls us to repentance. That men may come forward, in a right manner, to be baptized, confession of sins is demanded from them: otherwise the whole performance would be nothing but an idle mockery. Let it be observed, that we are here speaking of adults, who ought not, we are aware, to be admitted indiscriminately into the Church, or introduced by Baptism into the body of Christ, till an examination has been previously made.

He who cometh after me is stronger than I. Christ is thus declared to be so far superior in power and rank, that, with respect to him, John must occupy a private station. He uses ordinary forms of speech to magnify the glory of Christ, in comparison of whom he declares that he himself is nothing. The chief part of his statement is, that he represents Christ as the author of spiritual baptism, and himself as only the minister of outward baptism. He appears to anticipate an objection, which might be brought forward. What was the design of the Baptism which he had taken upon himself? For it was no light matter to introduce any innovation whatever into the Church of God, and particularly to bring forward a new way of introducing persons into the Church, which was more perfect than

the law of God. He replies, that he did not proceed to do this without authority; but that his office, as minister of an outward symbol, takes nothing away from the power and glory of Christ.

Hence we infer, that his intention was not at all to distinguish between his own baptism, and that which Christ taught his disciples, and which he intended should remain in perpetual obligation in his Church. He does not contrast one visible sign with another visible sign, but compares the characters of master and servant with each other, and shows what is due to the master, and what is due to the servant. It ought not to have any weight with us, that an opinion has long and extensively prevailed, that John's baptism differs from ours. We must learn to form our judgment from the matter as it stands, and not from the mistaken opinions of men. And certainly the comparison, which they imagine to have been made, would involve great absurdities. It would follow from it, that the Holy Spirit is given, in the present day, by ministers. Again, it would follow that John's baptism was a dead sign, and had no efficacy whatever. Thirdly, it would follow, that we have not the same baptism with Christ: for it is sufficiently evident, that the fellowship, which he condescends to maintain with us, was ratified by this pledge, when he consecrated baptism in his own body.

We must therefore hold by what I have already said, that John merely distinguishes, in this passage, between himself and the other ministers of baptism, on the one hand, and the power of Christ, on the other, and maintains the superiority of the master over the servants. And hence we deduce the general doctrine, as to what is done in baptism by men, and what is accomplished in it by the Son of God. To men has been committed nothing more than the administration of an outward and visible sign: the reality dwells with Christ alone.

And, lo, the heavens were opened to him.

The opening of the heavens sometimes means a manifestation of heavenly glory; but here it means also a cleft, or opening, of the visible heaven, so that John could see something beyond the planets and stars. The words of Mark can have no other meaning, he saw the heavens cleft asunder. An exact inquiry into the way in which this opening was made, would be of no importance, nor is it necessary. It is sufficient for us to believe, that it was a symbol of the Divine presence. As the Evangelists say that John saw the Holy Spirit, it is probable that the opening of the heavens was chiefly on his account. Yet I do not hesitate to admit that Christ also, so far as he was man, received from it additional certainty as to his heavenly calling. This appears to be the tendency of the words of Luke: while Jesus was praying, the heaven was opened, (Luke 3:21:) for, though his prayers were always directed towards the benefit of others, yet as man, when he commenced a warfare of so arduous a description, he needed to be armed with a remarkable power of the Spirit.

But here two questions arise. The first is, why did the Spirit, who had formerly dwelt in Christ, descend upon him at that time? This question is answered by a passage of the prophet Isaiah, which will be handled in another place.

“The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord God hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the broken-hearted,” (Isaiah

61:1.) Though the grace of the Spirit was bestowed on Christ in a remarkable and extraordinary manner, (John 3:34,) yet he remained at home as a private person, till he should be called to public life by the Father. Now that the full time is come, for preparing to discharge the office of Redeemer, he is clothed with a new power of the Spirit, and that not so much for his own sake, as for the sake of others. It was done on purpose, that believers might learn to receive, and to contemplate with reverence, his divine power, and that the weakness of the flesh might not make him despised.

This was also the reason why he delayed his baptism till the thirtieth year of his age, (Luke 3:23.) Baptism was an appendage to the Gospel: and therefore it began at the same time with the preaching of the Gospel. When Christ was preparing to preach the Gospel, he was introduced by Baptism into his office; and at the same time was endued with the Holy Spirit. When John beholds the Holy Spirit descending upon Christ, it is to remind him, that nothing carnal or earthly must be expected in Christ, but that he comes as a godlike man,²⁹⁷ descended from heaven, in whom the power of the Holy Spirit reigns. We know, indeed, that he is God manifested in the flesh, (1 Timothy 3:16:) but even in his character as a servant, and in his human nature, there is a heavenly power to be considered.

The second question is, why did the Holy Spirit appear in the shape of a dove, rather than in that of fire? The answer depends on the analogy, or resemblance between the figure and the thing represented. We know what the prophet Isaiah ascribes to Christ.

“He shall not cry, nor lift up, nor cause his voice to be heard in the street. A bruised reed shall he not break, and the smoking flax shall he not quench,” (Isaiah 42:2, 3.)

On account of this mildness of Christ, by which he kindly and gently called, and every day invites, sinners to the hope of salvation, the Holy Spirit descended upon him in the appearance of a dove And in this symbol has been held out to us an eminent token of the sweetest consolation, that we may not fear to approach to Christ, who meets us, not in the formidable power of the Spirit, but clothed with gentle and lovely grace.

He saw the Spirit of God

That is, John saw: for it immediately follows, that the Spirit descended on Christ There now arises a third question, how could John see the Holy Spirit? I reply: As the Spirit of God is everywhere present, and fills heaven and earth, he is not said, in a literal sense, to descend, and the same observation may be made as to his appearance. Though he is in himself invisible, yet he is spoken of as beheld, when he exhibits any visible sign of his presence. John did not see the essence of the Spirit, which cannot be discerned by the senses of men; nor did he see his power, which is not beheld by human senses, but only by the understanding of faith: but he saw the appearance of a dove, under which God showed the presence of his Spirit. It is a figure of speech, by which the sign is put for the thing signified, the name of a spiritual object being applied to the visible sign.

While it is foolish and improper to press, as some do, the literal meaning, so as to include both the sign and the thing signified, we must observe, that the connection subsisting between the sign and the thing signified is denoted by these modes of expression. In this sense, the bread of the Lord's Supper is called the body of Christ, (1 Corinthians 10:16:) not because it is so, but because it assures us, that the body of Christ is truly given to us for food. Meanwhile, let us bear in mind what I have just mentioned, that we must not

imagine a descent of the thing signified, so as to seek it in the sign, as if it had a bodily place there, but ought to be abundantly satisfied with the assurance, that God grants, by his secret power, all that he holds out to us by figures.

Another question more curious than useful has been put. Was this dove a solid body, or the appearance of one? Though the words of Luke seem to intimate that it was not the substance of a body, but only a bodily appearance; yet, lest I should afford to any man an occasion of wrangling, I leave the matter unsettled.

And, lo, a voice from heaven

From that opening of the heavens, which has been already mentioned, a loud voice was heard, that its majesty might be more impressive. The public appearance of Christ, to undertake the office of Mediator, was accompanied by this announcement, in which he was offered to us by the Father, that we may rely on this pledge of our adoption, and boldly call God himself our Father. The designation of Son belongs truly and naturally to Christ alone: but yet he was declared to be the Son of God in our flesh, that the favor of Him, whom he alone has a right to call Father, may be also obtained for us. And thus when God presents Christ to us as Mediator, accompanied by the title of Son, he declares that he is the Father of us all, (Ephesians 4:6.)

Such, too, is the import of the epithet beloved: for in ourselves we are hateful to God, and his fatherly love must flow to us by Christ. The best expounder of this passage is the Apostle Paul, when he says “who hath predestinated us into adoption by Jesus Christ in himself, according to the good pleasure of his will; to the praise of the glory of his grace, in which he hath accepted us in the Beloved,” (Ephesians 1:5,6) that is, in his beloved Son. It is still more fully expressed by these words, in whom I am well pleased They imply, that the love of God rests on Christ in such a manner, as to diffuse itself from him to us all; and not to us only, but even to the angels themselves. Not that they need reconciliation, for they never were at enmity with God: but even they become perfectly united to God, only by means of their Head, (Ephesians 1:22.) For the same reason, he is also called “the first-born of every creature,” (Colossians 1:5;) and Paul likewise states that Christ came “to reconcile all things to himself, both those which are on earth, and those which are in heavens,” (Colossians 1:20.)