

XIII. - John the Baptist.

And saying: Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. MATTH. 3:2.

John the Baptist, before the Messiah appears, fulfills another special calling, closely connected with the preparation for the coming of our King throughout Israel's past. For the appearance of Immanuel to be successful, it was essential that a religious and moral atmosphere, a mind and imagination be prepared in advance, and that a personal circle be established to which he could belong. This indispensable preparation was effected in Abraham's isolation and in Israel's history, and it is noticeable how the Diaspora, i.e. the dispersion of the Jews at that time through the countries to the east and west of Palestine, particularly on the Euphrates, in Egypt, in Greece and Italy, gave the same point of connection to the Apostles and the evangelists, when they also spread the Gospel among the Gentiles. Not only did the preaching of the Gospel usually originate from the Synagogue, but long before that the knowledge of Israel's Revelation had come through the Synagogue to the seriously minded Gentiles. And even if it were only a few who had themselves circumcised, the number of men and women everywhere, especially from the upper classes, who feared God and allowed themselves to be found in the Synagogue, was quite large. We know how in Capernaum even the Synagogue of the Jews was built by such a devoted pagan. It is not going too far to speak of two kinds of preparation from Israel, in Palestine before the arrival of the King himself, and in the Diaspora before the arrival of his apostles.

But of how great importance this general preparation for Immanuel's appearance may have been in Israel, still, when his coming was imminent, a final preparation was needed, and for that John the Baptist appeared. The prophecy had already pointed to the coming of such a forerunner. A voice of those calling in the wilderness had been heard: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make a straight path for our God in the wilderness". And it was heard from Malachi's lips: "See, I will send my angel to prepare the way before me. And in an even more specific sense: "Behold, I send you Elijah, the prophet, before the great and dreadful day of the Lord comes". Thus, John the Baptist appeared before Jesus, not only to announce his imminent coming, but also to bring about a shifting of the spirits, and to bring together again all that had built up in Israel's history and prophecy the ideal concept of the Messiah and to set it firmly against the distorted national view. John tells the Israel of that time that God can also beget Abraham children from the stones of the rocky desert. This is the jaw-dropping blow against the fallacious, fleshly patriotism that boasted only of descent. John transfers the baptism of

proselytes to the Jews themselves. This is the break with national pride. The pseudo-baptism that the Jews practiced, instead of saving them, destroyed them and, according to Jesus' sharp word, made them children of hell instead of children of God. True baptism, on the other hand, was the baptism that first led the Jew and then the Gentile out of their unholy state into the state of God. For this very reason John could only administer this baptism temporarily, while waiting for the one who would baptize with the fire of the Holy Spirit. And finally, John the Baptist destroyed all expectations of a return of Solomon's earthly glory in a Davidic Kingdom in Jerusalem, by announcing the coming of a King, whose Kingdom would not be earthly, but heavenly in nature. Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand."

This significance of John's action in the providential spiritual order cannot therefore be overstated. His was not just a preaching that summarized the prophecy, i.e., summarized it in short, his action was an act. He intervened with a powerful hand in the state of mind at that time. He brought about a fermentation in the minds of the entire country. That fermentation brought about a shift. In Jerusalem people looked upon his action with dismay. Herod trembled. The Sanhedrin became anxious. And yet the impression of his actions on the people was so overwhelming that they did not thirst for him and left him by the Jordan and that almost all over the country a group was formed that took sides with John and against the official clergy. Before his arrival, the spirit of the entire nation was shackled to the official clergy; and what he did and accomplished by his actions was to free the spirit of a part of the people, to call them back to the essence of things, to restore the higher and more ideal conception of the Messiah, and to join in with the great prophets who had risen before, during and shortly after the exile. It is also with that spiritually liberated and recalled part of Israel that Jesus found acceptance during his appearance. It is John who, through his baptism and preaching, has led the Bride of Israel to the Bridegroom who came.

All of this is brought together in John's Gospel of the Kingdom, in his proclamation that the Kingdom of heaven had come near; reason why Jesus Himself, at His appearing, summarizes in similar words the brief contents of the Gospel, and begins in the same way by testifying that the Kingdom of heaven has now begun. The kingdom is the kingdom of the King. The sermon thus does not begin by announcing the Savior, the Redeemer, but places the King in the foreground. The King would bring salvation and a glory that surpasses all others to

the people. He would also redeem from sin and reconcile with God, and be our guarantor of eternal life, but all that does not precede his Kingship, but follows from it. He will also be our prophet and our high priest, but not in order to become King first and establish His kingdom. It goes the other way around. Christ is our King, he establishes his kingdom, and as King he is also a prophet and priest, in order to make the establishment of his kingdom successful. Not enough attention has been paid to this. When hearing the word Kingdom, not enough attention was paid to the fact that there is no Kingdom without a King, and that whoever speaks of the Kingdom of heaven, supposes the heavenly King. John also announced Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, but only when he stood before the future disciples of the Christ. These were introduced more deeply. But his first and his general announcement to all the people was and remained the announcement of our King, whose kingdom was about to begin and of whom he was not worthy, precisely in view of that kingly honour, to untie his shoes. The kingdom, and thus the King, went first. Everything else followed. The Christ was a priest after the order of Melchizedek, but Melchizedek too was first King and as King first priest. Jesus' prophetic calling comes and passes. His high priestly act is accomplished on Golgotha. But he is and remains King. In that Kingship lies His very highness. To this end, Jesus himself said to Pilate, that is, to be King, I was born, and for this purpose I have come into the world. From the outset, his unbeatable majesty is drawn together in the Kinghood. Before going to Golgotha, he rides into Jerusalem on the colt of the donkey, under the cries of the people: "Hosanna the Son of David! One does not understand Scripture, therefore, if one thinks only of the Kingdom when John preaches and loses sight of the King. In the preaching of the Kingdom the preaching of the King was included, and the announcement of the King was even in the foreground. Without the King there is no Kingdom. The Kingdom is not first established for the King, so that he may later act in it. He himself brings about that kingdom in his own person. He founds it. It is only through his action that it comes into being.

This must be emphasized so strongly because, unfortunately, even among professors of Christ an idea took hold, as if the "Kingdom of Heaven" were to be understood as a certain spiritual order, outside of any connection with Jesus' Kingship. This conception has penetrated our minds from a wide circle which cries out for law and justice and boasts of spiritual ideals, but refuses to bow its knees to Jesus and, not feeling anything for his Kingship, refuses to honor him as King. They then generally and metaphorically speak of a spiritual realm, a realm of the

ideal, a realm of justice, and imagine that the expression "Kingdom of Heaven" is to be understood in the same metaphorical sense. As soon as justice triumphs and high moral ideals take root, it is thought that the kingdom of the spirit will of itself come to rule. This is then understood to be entirely outside Jesus' personal rule. Such a kingdom, such a spiritual kingdom, they imagine, would have come along the way even if Jesus had never appeared. It is a kingdom in itself that must gradually come to victory and triumph. And even if one then acknowledges that Jesus is also among those who have promoted the coming of this kingdom of the spirit, one nevertheless understands this only from its moral and spiritual and religious influence, and does not think of putting all this in direct and inseparable connection with Jesus' Kingship. That is why even those who honor in Jesus no other than a Rabbi of Nazareth, and even doubt his absolute sinfulness, can fool around with that Kingdom of heaven; a Kingdom, which then by no means would have been founded by Jesus, but to whose foundation all nobler figures among all nations have contributed, and only in this sense also Jesus, for his share. Now this whole idea goes against everything that has been revealed to us in Scripture. Not until Jesus comes has this Kingdom of heaven come near. It is a Kingdom that begins with the coming of the King. A Kingdom, as it was announced in the prophecy, with its roots in Israel's history and in David's house. A kingdom that cannot be thought of without the King, that is summed up in the King, that enters the world only with his appearance, and that will reach the revelation of its full glory through him and him alone. The concept of a spiritual realm in the figurative sense was entirely foreign to Israel. This conception came from the Greco-Roman world, not from the Israelite world. It is a deductive attitude, which is completely out of place in the interpretation of Scripture. A kingdom without a king in the most literal sense of the word is, on the lips of the Baptist and on those of Jesus himself, an inner contradiction.

Figuratively speaking, we Westerners speak of a kingdom of minerals, a kingdom of plants, a kingdom of animals, and also of a kingdom of arts and sciences, the kingdom of truth, the kingdom of justice. The French even speak of a *règne de la mode*, the realm of fashion. The scholars among us, in connection with the Latin custom and our former state orientation, repeatedly spoke of the *res publica litterarum*, i.e., the republic of letters, which amounts to the same thing. Everything that was a closed whole with fixed laws was presented as an empire. Sometimes one even went so far as to speak of a lion as the king of the animal kingdom, of a cedar as the king of the plant kingdom, and of gold as the king of the

mineral kingdom. But all this remained figurative, a transferable manner of speaking, in which one does not think of a personal king. And by applying the same to the realm of truth, the realm of good and the realm of beauty, one arrived at a conception of the kingdom of heaven that was completely in line with the rule of good, true and beautiful. In Frankfurt on the Main the inscription "Devoted to good, to true, and to beautiful" is inscribed on the facade of the Opera House in large letters, and it is actually in this same spirit that all too many have created the "Kingdom of Heaven". To the foundation of this kingdom it was now recognized that, like Plato and Aristotle, like Solon and Lycurgus, yes, in a more elevated sense even Jesus must have contributed, but it was all taken metaphorically, and it is precisely this figurative, metaphorical conception that is unknown in the East and appears nowhere in Scripture. The trees are still metaphorically introduced as seeking a king, but the word kingdom is nowhere found in Scripture in the metaphorical sense we often ascribe to it. Especially as soon as we arrive at what we call the organic kingdom, it is impossible to conceive of the whole as a kingdom without conscious legislation, conscious administration, conscious jurisdiction, and conscious struggle against the enemies who want to overthrow the kingdom. And since this conscious regiment of a kingdom is only conceivable in a personal King, the Kingdom of heaven may and cannot be understood in any other way than as a kingdom with its King, founded by its King, maintained by its King, ruled by its King, and defended by its King against its enemies. Accordingly, Jesus also appears in Scripture as the King of the kingdom of God, as the King who founds, maintains, reigns and protects the kingdom of heaven, and who, as King of that kingdom, will one day sit as Judge to judge the living and the dead, and at the same time, with this judgment, to deal the final blow to his enemies, so that they must all submit to him. Strictly, and without admitting anything, it must therefore be maintained that John's announcement, later taken over by Jesus himself, reads: "that the Kingdom of heaven had come near", implied the announcement of the Messiah himself, i.e., the announcement of the King who would bring us the Kingdom.

Now let it be noted that the expression "Kingdom of Heaven," occurs only in the Gospel of Matthew, and that, even in places with the same name, the other Evangelists already use the expression of the Kingdom of God. The same thing, but indicated in slightly different terms. Now, in the expression "Kingdom of God", the King is mentioned by name; it is the kingdom in which God Himself is King; and if Matthew too had chosen this form of expression, the figurative view

would probably never have been accepted; and it is more than anything the expression in which: from heaven, instead of: from God, is written, that has led to this figurative view. The idea that, if there is mention of the Kingdom of God, this would not include, but rather exclude, the Kingship of Jesus, does of course not hold water. It is precisely in the Kingship of Christ that the Kingship of God operates and is maintained. Rather, in this expression of the Kingdom of God lies the higher purpose of stating that it was God Himself who would come to us in Christ, and that the Christ would not be an ordinary descendant of David, but such a descendant, such a sprout of David, in whom the Eternal Word, who was God and with God, would Himself take on the flesh, that is our nature, and this from the lineage of David.

This goes back to what we have already explained. Originally there was no king on earth in Israel, because God Himself, in a completely theocratic sense, was the King of Israel. It was therefore a rejection of his God as his King when, in Samuel's day, Israel cried out for an earthly King. Saul therefore fell, and only in David did God himself raise up a royal family, which in the end would flow again into the kingship of God himself, and thus restore the original state. Already the prophecy had clearly foretold that this would happen through one who would be "Council, Strong God' himself, and who, as Immanuel, would cause God himself to reign in his reign. John's announcement that, shortly after his appearance, an absolute Theocracy would arise again through the coming of the Kingdom of God, thus implies both a fulfillment of the prophecy and at the same time a contradiction with what Israel had wrongfully desired. Israel had rejected the Kingdom of God. Then an earthly kingdom had come. But the divine order had led to this in such a way that, in addition to that earthly Kinghood of David, the theocratic Kingship of God would ultimately return, and this by the first mystery that was gradually revealed, that one day God Himself would be revealed in a sprout from the House of David.

John's announcement of the Kingdom of God, or the Kingdom of Heaven, thus goes directly against the expectations of the Jews at that time. Their national arrogance is rejected, for God is King not only over Israel, but over all mankind, and God will reveal Himself as King, not by crowning another Jew from the house of David, but by sending His one-born Son, and in Himself revealing Himself to Israel and to the whole world. Israel was called to service. It was the people chosen by God to receive the Revelation and to carry salvation in an imaginary form. But once that calling had been fulfilled and that task completed, what arose from Israel

was to flow out through the whole world, and thus humanity was to take Israel's place. In this way Israel would also retain a place of honor among the nations, but it would have to relinquish its entirely unique and exceptional position of its own accord. It was not to become a Jewish kingship, with all the nations and peoples submitting to the Jewish People's State, but the Jewish People's State was to merge into the Kingdom of God over all our generation. That is what happened, but against Israel's will and choice. It even violently resisted this transition. It beat the Christ on the Cross and thus brought upon itself the judgment that came in the destruction of Jerusalem thirty years later. Yet the people of the Jews have remained a nation ever since. While all the surrounding peoples disappeared without trace, the Jewish nation is still there, and has even grown to almost twelve million. It also still possesses very special intellectual gifts, which of course it only receives from God. But with all this it has moved beyond the line of the Kingdom of Heaven. This is the necessary consequence that was inherent in John's announcement that now the Kingdom of God was to be restored not only over Israel, but over the world, and that this would not be the earthly Kingdom, but the Kingdom of heaven.

The King is thus in the foreground. That King is God Himself. God Himself reveals Himself in the Son of His love. Thus, the Christ acts in His name as King, and it is through Him that God reigns again as King. And this reign of the Christ lasts until the royal authority is actually and truly restored in all spheres of the spirit, and then the Son will hand over the kingdom to the Father Himself, that God may be Triune all and in all. Jesus expresses the same when he says: "My Kingdom is not from here." The Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Christ are one. Therefore, there can be no question of a figurative conception. In den Christ the King acts personally. From him goes out the law for the Kingdom, as he exposes it especially in his parables about the Kingdom. He rules that Kingdom. As King of that Kingdom, he will one day sit as Judge. And it is he who personally fights for that Kingdom, to subdue and render powerless all enemies who oppose it. It must never be said, therefore, that this Kingdom has a purely spiritual character. For it does begin by not coming "with outward countenance." There is no throne on earth for our King. His is no glorious court procession. He has no armed force marching before him. There is no crown of diamonds on earth, which shall be pressed upon his head. But this purely spiritual character of the Kingdom of which he is King will not last forever. Once the spiritual struggle draws to a close, his Kingdom will also break physically. The whole of nature will be shaken up; the existing order of

things will be violently changed; events will take place that are so terrible that the whole earth will melt away, and later it will shine in splendor as a new earth under a new heaven. The full meaning of this cannot yet be worked out here, but it must nevertheless be pointed out in this connection, because all figurative conceptions of the kingdom of heaven have led, and must lead, with necessity and of themselves to reject the Last Judgment as a product of fantasy, and to overturn everything in prophecy, in the reasons of Jesus, in the apostolic letters, and in the Revelation of John that points to these physical events that await in the end of days.