

“What did you go out to see?” That’s the question Jesus puts to the crowd concerning John the Baptist. And I think we can get the sense easily enough. “What did you go out to see?” It’s like asking, “What did you expect?” or “Why are you here?”

Jesus asks this rhetorical question in order to rebuke false, worldly ideas. But He does so by encouraging the people to remember what they know to be true. “You know why you went out to see John. You know. Act accordingly.” As we consider these questions, we’ll see that they apply not only to the crowds but to us today as well.

First off, Jesus asks, “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind?” This is actually two questions, each making a point. Jesus first asks them why they went out into the wilderness. John wasn’t going door-to-door, simply requiring people to get off the couch and temporarily mute the TV to hear what he had to say.

No, to go out to hear John and even to be baptized by him required effort. It was a longer trip into a less-than-hospitable place. To go out into the wilderness showed that the people had valued what John had to say. It was a hardship, but it was worth it.

Jesus then asks if they went to see a reed shaken by the wind. Did they go out to see someone who was blown whichever way popular opinion dictated? Someone whose message could change and even go the opposite way if that’s what people wanted to hear? Someone who would never stand up to anyone but instead always bend and compromise?

No! John the Baptist was the very opposite of that. John’s message remained constant and faithful. He wasn’t afraid to tell people the truth, even if it meant calling a bunch of Jewish religious leaders a brood of vipers – something Jesus would echo in His words to them. John called everyone to repent, to turn from sin and live according to God’s word, that they might be prepared for the coming of the Messiah. This included everyone from prostitutes and tax collectors all the way up to King Herod himself.

John said it like it was, regardless of what people wanted to hear, because he was faithful. The people went out to hear John because they knew that his words were solid and true.

Next, Jesus asks, “What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing?” Soft, luxurious clothing were a privilege of wealth. A preacher who had such clothing clearly would’ve been well-liked by the rich and powerful – and possibly in their pocket as well. Such a preacher would say what people wanted to hear, and what would then benefit him personally.

Was this John? Not even close! John’s attire was far from soft: a camel-hair robe and a leather belt, the attire of Elijah. He didn’t feast in the dining halls of the rich; he ate locusts and wild honey in the wilderness. John wasn’t in the king’s palace, being a sycophant and a yes-man to those who could benefit him. He was in the king’s prison, having been a herald of truth and a preacher of repentance to those who could do him harm.

The people went out to see John because they knew that John wasn't in it for himself. They knew that what he preached truth, and he would preach it even if it cost him.

Jesus finally asks, "What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet." Jesus, the God who sent the prophets, confirms that John is indeed a prophet. What John had spoken was not John's own ideas or opinions; they were the words of the Lord. John had followed in the footsteps of his great predecessors such as Isaiah and Jeremiah, calling the people to turn from their sins and back to God. John had foretold the blessing that would come when God redeemed His people. The people went to hear John because John's word was God's Word.

And yet Jesus tells them that John is more than a prophet. What does this mean? All the prophets had pointed people to God and reminded them of the promised Messiah in whom they were to trust. Yet for them, it was always far off. Think of the words of Balaam, an unwilling man who was nevertheless used to speak God's word: "I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel."

Contrast that to the words of John the Baptist, who declares, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" and says this while physically pointing at Jesus. John got to be the forerunner, prophesied to prepare the way of the Lord, to herald the Lord's imminent coming. John pointed everyone he could to Christ, even while Christ was present.

This includes even his own disciples. When people pointed out that Jesus was baptizing more people than him, John humbly declared, "He must increase, but I must decrease." Even in prison, John sends his disciples to Jesus, that they may realize that Jesus is the Christ, and follow Him. Why did the people go out in the wilderness to hear John? Because John was a true prophet of God, and in faithfulness and humility, John sent them to Jesus.

With this in mind, let us ask ourselves that same question that Jesus put to the crowds: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see?" Or, more in our context, "What did you come here to hear?" Why do you go to church? We should hear this question of Jesus in the same way that He spoke it to the crowds: a rebuke of our worldly desires and compromises, and yet also encouragement, to remind us of what we know, of what our Lord does for us as we gather together.

Have you come to hear a reed shaken by the wind? Are you looking for justification or endorsement of whatever the current social movements are? Did you come looking to hear the same opinions you hear on your news feed of choice, just with a veneer of religion? Were you hoping to hear something that's great today but in five years will be seen as totally backwards and wrongheaded?

God forbid it! Such a church cannot claim to be the faithful bride of Christ, but is a harlot for the world. And thoughts and opinions that cannot even stand for a decade or two certainly have no strength in the face of eternity. No, that's not why you're here. Christians desire the truth. The Church is built on the rock. We preach Jesus Christ: the same yesterday, today, and forever.

Have you come to see, and maybe even receive, soft clothing? Were you hoping for some rhetorical mush to make you feel all warm and fuzzy? Are you here to hear promises about how if you just love God enough your life will get better and you won't have any problems? Do you look for a church that will only affirm you and encourage you and comfort you, but will definitely never challenge you or require that you change?

Again, God forbid it! The Church is here to give people glorious robes, but they are the white robes of heaven, not the latest styles in this life. The Church is here to give comfort, but it is the comfort that comes from truly addressing and absolving sin, not just administering spiritual morphine. The sheep of God's flock need the Good Shepherd to bring them to His sheepfold, even if they don't want to come, not a hireling who will sit back and collect his pay while the sheep wander off.

Have you come, then, to hear the word of God? Are you here to here the word spoken by the same Lord who has spoken through His servants the prophets, and who now in these last days has spoken to us by His Son? Have you come to worship the God who does not change, whose word will never pass away even though heaven and earth will? Are you here because you desire to build your house upon the rock, so that when the winds of change blow and the floods of tribulation come, you may stand firm? As Christians, that is why God the Holy Spirit has brought you here.

The Church follows in the footsteps of the prophets, speaking the true words of God to all who would hear them. Only by speaking God's word does the Church provide what the world truly needs. Only by speaking the word does she give any lasting benefit. The word she speaks will at times cause offense, not because we desire it to, but because it is the word of Jesus, and Jesus caused offense. The reason why He says, "and blessed is the one who is not offended by me" is because His words offend our sinful flesh and can only be received through repentance and faith. Yet where the word is received through these gifts of God, the blessings of Christ abound: forgiveness, life, and salvation.

The word is not the only gift of Christ the Church is blessed with, either. As John was a prophet and yet more than a prophet, preaching of Christ as Christ was in their midst, we today do not only preach of Christ, but we have Christ in our midst as well. Jesus told John's disciples to go back and report what they saw and heard: "the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them."

Still today, Christ works through His disciples to do His works. Those spiritually blind are granted eyes of faith. Those lame and crippled by sin are restored and granted to walk in the paths of God. The leprosy of sin – incurable by any human effort – is cleansed by the blood of Jesus. Those deaf to the truth have their ears, and hearts, opened to the things of God. The dead are raised to new life, born from above in the waters of Holy Baptism. And the poor – the poor in spirit – have the good news – the Gospel of Jesus Christ – preached to them.

The works of Christ are still being done by Him through His Church. As He tells His disciples shortly before His crucifixion and resurrection, "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father." As He walked this earth, Jesus miraculously healed bodies that still ended up dying. Working through

His Church, Jesus still miraculously heals souls that will live forever. What you receive when you gather together as Christ's Church are gifts that you cannot get anywhere else.

So again, then, why are you here? What did you come out to see? A church that is a cultural relic, a reenactment of warm memories, a rubber stamp for culture? Or a Church that speaks with the ageless voice of the prophets, that unyieldingly clings to the Rock of the word, that points to Christ and through whom Christ still brings forth His saving works? God grant us the faithfulness of John the Baptist, that we may always be a Church worth going out to see.

In Jesus' name, amen.