

"Division Bell"

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

One of the fixtures in the Houses of Parliament in London is the "division bell," which is rung to signal that a division is occurring and that members of the House of Commons or the House of Lords have eight minutes to get to their chosen division lobby to vote for or against a resolution. The generator for the House of Commons sounds the Division Bell for exactly eight minutes. As soon as the bell stops, the door keepers manning the entrances to the two division lobbies close and lock the doors. Any MP who has failed to enter the lobby in time has lost the ability to vote in that division.

Even for those of us who have never sat in Parliament and answered the call of the Division Bell, there are signals throughout our lives that demand a response. Our school days were governed by the ringing of the bell that called us to class and signaled when anyone not at their desk was late, resulting in a visit to the dreaded Attendance Office. The factory up the hill from our house in North Plainfield rang its bell at the beginning and the end of each day's shift, calling workers to their assigned posts and announcing when the workday was over. Our churches often ring bells minutes before the service, calling the faithful to worship. We know in many circumstances *"for whom the bell tolls – it tolls for thee."*

The call of John the Baptist in today's Gospel lesson functions as a "division bell" for God's people, calling us to action and response. John the Baptist appears suddenly in Matthew's Gospel as a character very similar to prophets of the Old Testament: *"He dresses like Elijah, and he sounds like Isaiah or Amos."* (Ben Witherington). He is identified as the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy of *"the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"* (Matthew 3:3; Isaiah 40:3). John also fulfills the prophecy of Malachi, the messenger of God who will be *"like a refiner's fire and like fuller's soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness."* (Malachi 3:2-3). The description of John's clothing and food (*"Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey."* – 3:4) serves to separate him from elegant society and to identify him with the wilderness that was to be the scene of renewal for God's people. (While a diet of locusts may appear strange to us, they were a ritually clean food [*"Of them you may eat: the locust according to its kind, the bald locust according to its kind, the cricket according to its kind, and the grasshopper according to its kind."* – Leviticus 11:22] eaten by poorer people of the desert from ancient times until today.). John's appearance and diet did not deter the crowds from coming out into the wilderness: *"Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins."* (3:5). Unlike the ritual washings of Judaism (*mikveh*), John's baptism had eschatological implications, sealing converts from the judgment to come.

What inspired these crowds to leave the comforts of home and make the arduous and often dangerous journey through the wilderness was the "division bell" of John's proclamation: *"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."* (3:2). Repentance (*metanoia*) refers to far more than simply being or saying that one is sorry for past sins; it is more than mere regret or remorse for failings or transgressions. The call to repentance is a call to *"a turning away from a past way of life and the inauguration of a new one, in this case initialized by an act of baptism."* (Witherington). John's call to repentance places him in the prophetic tradition of Old Testament prophets who also called God's people to turn away from the paths that were leading them away from God so that they might return to the Lord:

- “Yet even now, says the LORD, return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.” – Joel 2:12-13.
- “If you return, O Israel, says the LORD, if you return to me, if you remove your abominations from my presence, and do not waver, and if you swear, ‘As the LORD lives!’ in truth, in justice, and in uprightness, then nations shall be blessed by him, and by him they shall boast.” – Jeremiah 4:1-2.
- “Come, let us return to the LORD; for it is he who has torn, and he will heal us; he has struck down, and he will bind us up. After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him. Let us know, let us press on to know the LORD; his appearance is as sure as the dawn; he will come to us like the showers, like the spring rains that water the earth.” – Hosea 6:1-3.
- “Therefore say to them, Thus says the LORD of hosts: Return to me, says the LORD of hosts, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts. Do not be like your ancestors, to whom the former prophets proclaimed, ‘Thus says the LORD of hosts, Return from your evil ways and from your evil deeds.’ But they did not hear or heed me, says the LORD.” – Zechariah 1:3-4.

Among those who have come out into the wilderness to be in John’s presence are the Pharisees and Sadducees, two rival groups who were the leaders of the Jewish people. Matthew indicates that they were also “*coming for baptism*,” but John’s response to them indicates that he has suspicions about their motives: “*You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?*” (3:7). A “brood of vipers” (literally “sons of snakes”) was not merely an insulting term, but pictures them as predatory, poisonous false teachers who pervert the people. Whatever their motives for being on the banks of the Jordan, these will be among Jesus’ fiercest opponents during our Lord’s ministry. Like all who have answered the Baptist’s call, they must also “*bear fruit worthy of repentance*,” that which the Lord requires of his people as expressed by the prophet Micah:

- “With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” – Micah 6:6-8.

The urgency of John’s “division bell” call to repentance is expressed in his declaration that “*even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire*.” (3:10). Like other prophets, John sees the judgment as already on the horizon and the basis for his urgent call to repentance. An appeal to belonging to the elect group by virtue of descent from Abraham will not save one from the fiery judgment. Inclusion in the holy people of God and acceptance at the last judgment is based not on descent from Abraham and belonging to Israel, but on response to the call to decision to baptism and the corresponding “fruits” that are evidence of this new life:

- “You know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will know them by their fruits.” – Matthew 7:16-20.

The harshness of John’s criticism of the Pharisees and Sadducees may stem from his perception that they are present at the Jordan because they perceive the Baptist as a threat to their authority. John’s call to repentance and baptism may be seen by them as a way of receiving forgiveness of sins without going to Jerusalem and offering a sacrifice at the Temple. Their uneasiness over John’s preaching would only have been compounded by his declaration that merely being a descendant of Abraham or a pious person of faith in itself does not exempt a person from the coming judgment if they do not change their ways. John foresees a coming judgment in which the “coming one” will “*clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire*.” (3:12).

But John is not interested in establishing a position of power for himself to rival that of the Jerusalem officials; John is clear that his mission is to announce the coming of and point the way to “the coming one.” While he is baptizing with water for repentance, *“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.”* (3:11). John knows that his place in God’s story of salvation is to be the one who fulfills God’s promises spoken by the prophets while he points beyond himself to the true fulfillment of what God intends for God’s people. He even points out Jesus to his own disciples so that they might follow the man from Nazareth rather than himself in the Fourth Gospel:

- “The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, ‘Look, here is the Lamb of God!’ The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus.” – John 1:35-37.

John the Baptist knows who he is and what his purpose is in the story of salvation: he is the one ringing the “division bell” and calling people to prepare themselves for the coming Messiah, the one *“who was and is and is to come.”* (Revelation 4:8).

- “Dressed in animal hair with a piece of tanned hide around his waist, his breath heavy with locusts and wild honey, John proclaimed that Someone was coming, someone so spectacular that it was not enough simply to hand around waiting for him to arrive. It was time to get ready, to prepare the way, so that when he came he could walk a straight path right to their doors ... He called people to wake up, to turn around, so that they would not miss the new thing God was doing right before their eyes.” – Barbara Brown Taylor.

The “division bell” of John the Baptist continues to ring in our midst today, calling us to prepare ourselves for the coming of our Lord – not merely in our annual celebration of the birth of our Saviour at Christmas, but our Lord’s coming into our lives every day even as we await his coming at the end of days. It is a call for us to remove anything and everything that seeks to separate us from God’s presence, anything that seeks to place itself where only Christ should be, *“so that he might come to have first place in everything.”* (Colossians 1:18). It is a signal for us to heed the call of repentance, to turn around from those paths that are leading us away from God so that we might return to the only true God who is the only true source of light and life. It is a clarion call for us to seize this moment to make a fresh start, a clean break from our past, so that we might renew our walk of faith in loving our Lord with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and our neighbour as ourselves. The division bell that is rung by John the Baptist rouses us from our slumber and complacency so that we might recognize that *“now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!”* (2 Corinthians 6:2).

- “Then lay aside all that might hinder his way. Put away the gross and open sins, but above all the sins of the spirit, which have the appearance of holiness but which most impede his coming to you. Receive him with rejoicing, obey him, and believe in him, and come to be baptized. If you do this, you will be blessed by God, will receive the forgiveness of your sins, and will truly become his people saved and holy.” – Martin Luther, 1540.

The “division bell” that calls each Christian to repent and return to the Lord is also calling the Church to repent of its errant ways as it returns to the purpose for which the Lord created it, to be *“a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may declare the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”* (1 Peter 2:9). We Lutherans bear the name of the great Reformer who rang the “division bell” at a time when the Church had strayed from proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ, substituting human regulations and restrictions for the liberating word of God’s gracious love. The movement that grew out of Luther’s followers stated in its foundational documents that *“at all times there must be and remain one holy, Christian church. It is the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel.”* (Augsburg Confession). It was Luther’s prayer for the Church of Jesus Christ that our Lord would keep it *“steadfast in your word; curb those who by deceit or sword*

would wrest the kingdom from your Son and bring to naught all he has done.” (ELW Hymn 517). In the Twentieth Century, Dietrich Bonhoeffer called the church to be a disciple community that was willing to suffer the consequences of witnessing to the Gospel in the midst of the horrors of World War II, a witness that cost Bonhoeffer his life. But Bonhoeffer also reminds us that even though the “cost of discipleship” might be severe, the church that seeks to be faithful to its call has Christ’s assurance that even though *“you will be hated by all because of my name ... the one who endures to the end will be saved.”* (Mark 13:13). Our generation of the Church hears the “division bell” that calls us to recommit ourselves to our Lord’s calling to his church in every age to be faithful to sharing the good news of Jesus Christ in the midst of changes and challenges we have not faced for a long time:

- “Nothing guarantees that the Christian church as we have experienced it in the West for sixteen odd centuries will continue, ‘world without end.’ On the contrary, it is pretty obvious to anyone who cares about the church’s future that the vast changes which have occurred in Christendom for nearly two centuries have accelerated since World War II, and that a great question mark is written over the Christian future – not just the distant future, but the future that is already impinging on the present.” – Douglas John Hall, *The Future of the Church*.

Every generation of Christians hears the “division bell” that our Lord rings, calling us to decide whether we will decide to commit ourselves to serving others in the name of Jesus Christ or turning the church into yet another social club, caring for itself with no regard to our Lord or others. The call to repentance demands a decision here and now; it is the challenge that Joshua presented when he rang the “division bell” in the midst of the people of Israel as they entered the Promised Land:

- “Now therefore revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.” – Joshua 24:14-15.

*“Beyond the horizon of the place we lived when we were young,
In a world of magnets and miracles
Our thoughts strayed constantly and without boundary,
The ringing of the division bell had begun.”* – Pink Floyd, “High Hopes”

When the division bell rings, Members of Parliament have a limited amount of time to respond with a decision as to which division they will join. The division bell that John the Baptist rings demands a response from us in a similarly timely fashion; it is the bell that calls each of us to repent of our errant ways and return to the Lord who comes to shine light in the midst of the world’s darkness. While many have chosen the darkness *“because their deeds were evil ... for all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed.”* (John 3:19-20), we choose to walk as children of the light, for *“those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”* (John 3:20). We choose as individual children of God and as the community of God’s faithful people that is the Church to serve the Lord, to embody Christ’s love in this place, to let Christ’s light shine before others so that they may see our good works and glorify our Father in heaven.

The “division bell” of Advent has rung. Let us answer its call; let us return to the Lord; let us walk as children of the light of the one who is to come. Amen.