

Welcome, as we gather here again to make an offering to God – an offering of praise, an offering of worship – to the God who created us, and loves us, and died for us to save us from our sins. Thank you for being here today to make your offering. Whether this is your first time here or you're here all the time, we are here as one body to make this offering together.

I like to start my homilies with that kind of welcome. John the Baptist – not so much. He gets right down to business. “You brood of vipers!” That’s what John the Baptist calls some of those who came to him to be baptized, in the verse right after our reading today. I have a feeling he wasn’t on his synagogue’s hospitality committee. You brood of vipers. Imagine if, when you came to confession, I saw you coming and said, “You snake. Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath, who told you to come here?” I probably wouldn’t have a very long line waiting to come to celebrate the sacrament.

Why does John the Baptist say this to the crowds who had come to be baptized by him? After all, he has been proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as St. Luke tells us. Aren’t they doing what he wanted them to do? That would be like me inviting you to come to confession, and then asking you why you were there.

If we look at the next lines, we may be able to guess what was going through John's mind. He calls them a brood of vipers, and then says, "Produce good fruits as evidence of your repentance; and do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God can raise up children to Abraham from these stones. Even now the ax lies at the root of the trees. Therefore every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."

"Produce good fruits as evidence of your repentance." This is just my supposition, but it sounds to me like John the Baptist knew these people in front of him who were coming to repent, that perhaps they had been there before. In fact, it sounds like they may have been there just for show, and John knew it. They were there because it was the thing to do, to go out to the holy man John the Baptist in the desert, and these people had a fear of missing out.

John the Baptist had no patience for that. He was not an attraction, a side show that was there to give the people something to talk about. He was the voice of one crying in the wilderness, preparing the way for the Lord. And so he called them out. "Don't come here and say you repent of your sins if you aren't really sorry. Produce good fruits as evidence of your repentance."

Now, this is a tricky subject to broach in a homily, because I want you to come to confession. And I don't want you to be scrupulous and start asking yourselves,

“Am I really sorry for my sins? I feel sorry, but am I *really* sorry? If I was sorry, then why did I do it in the first place? And why do I keep committing the same sins? Maybe I’m not sorry after all.” Don’t listen to that voice! Confession is not a sacrament for the perfect; in fact, it’s the exact opposite. Confession is for sinners, a group that has as its membership every human being on the face of the earth. It is very rare for someone to have perfect contrition, to feel the true weight of our sins the way that Jesus felt them as he hung upon the cross. That level of sorrow for our sins is not necessary in order to be forgiven in confession. *Any* contrition is sufficient.

But, we should approach the sacrament of confession with careful thought about what we are doing. We are coming to ask God to forgive our sins, to acknowledge that we have hurt our relationship with One who loves us, and to ask Him to restore that relationship. If we were to hurt our relationship with our spouse, or a friend, or a family member, and then later go to them and say nonchalantly, “Yeah, sorry about that,” or worse, give a non-apology apology, “I’m sorry you were offended,” or “I’m sorry I had to do that,” they wouldn’t accept it, because they would know we weren’t really acknowledging that we did something wrong.

We should treat our relationship with God with at least the same amount of respect that we treat our relationship with our spouse or our closest friend. When we harm

that relationship, then we should go to Him and acknowledge that we were wrong and are in need of His forgiveness.

Because what we are really asking for is His death. That was the price of our redemption, that was the cost for our sins. When we go to our Lord and ask forgiveness, we are saying, “Lord, I screwed up. I’m in a tough spot. The gates of heaven are closed to me because of my sin. There’s only one way out of this for me, and that’s for you to choose to die on the cross for me.” And Jesus says, “Of course. Of course I will die for you. I know you’re sorry that you put me in this position, and I forgive you.”

That can be easy to forget because Christ’s death happened two thousand years ago, and he rose from the dead. But that sacrifice, in a mysterious way, extends throughout all of time. It reaches into the present day to redeem us from our sins that we commit, so that He does not have to die again because we sinned again. His sacrifice was once, and for all, but it was still our sins that put him on that cross.

“Produce good fruits as evidence of your repentance.” That doesn’t seem like an unreasonable command from John the Baptist when we think about the cost of our sins. Christ died for us; the least we could do is show him we are sorry by living our lives in a way that tries to show we do not take that sacrifice for granted.