

Homily for Advent III

+ The season of Advent is a prolonged meditation on the coming of Jesus Christ, and of His presence in and among His people. St. Bernard of Clairvaux, the famous Benedictine theologian and monastic reformer of the 12th century, observed that two of Christ's advents were visible—His first coming at Bethlehem, and His second coming to judge the quick and the dead—while the last advent is hidden, the arrival of Christ as He is formed mysteriously in His Church. We've had an abbreviated Advent this year, due to the weather, so we run the risk of losing sight of the bigger picture, the progression of thought that our collects and readings encourage us to make during this lead-up to the Christmas feast. Today, then, I'm first going to do a little Advent fly-over, to re-orient us a bit, and only then to speak with a little more focus about the themes for this third week in Advent. On the first Sunday in Advent, we are introduced to a governing theme of the whole season, symbolized in our worship by the repetition of the Advent collect throughout these four weeks, daily if we attend to the daily offices of morning and evening prayer. *Grant us grace, we pray, to cast away the works of darkness, and to put upon us the armor of light.* To put on that armor, following St. Paul's epistle to the Romans, is to put on Christ Himself. So, from the beginning of Advent, we adopt a posture of openness to the formation of Christ in our hearts, minds, and relationships with one another.

This last week, the second week in Advent, due to the snow we missed the opportunity to dwell together on one way in which Christ manifests Himself in this "hidden advent." Advent II celebrates, in its collect and readings, the presence of Christ communicated to us in the Holy Scriptures. *Read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them,* the prayer for that Sunday exhorts us. We are to feed on Jesus Christ through *patience and comfort* of the Word. "Patience and comfort" sound like tender, motherly qualities—but their older English meaning, as we've had opportunity to observe elsewhere, have quite different connotations. *Patience* here means openness to be worked upon, much as we mean now when we call a person who has submitted himself to the care of a physician *a patient*. *Patience* to the Holy Scriptures means immersing ourselves in them with a willingness to be confronted, perhaps convicted, and changed. *Patience* is the removal of unrighteousness, as the Holy Spirit communicates Christ to us, much as a physician with His scalpel. *Comfort* is the strengthening and nourishment that is provided to us in the Gospel, hidden in the Old Testament, revealed in the New.

That "catches us up" to this Sunday, the third stage in our Advent journey. We have pledged ourselves to put on Christ, and we have reflected on one invaluable way in which we do this—meditation on the Holy Scriptures. This week, we turn to focus on the presence of Christ as He comes to His Church through the life, work, and witness of Christian ministers. This is one of those cases of "liturgical synergy" that sometimes animate the Christian year. During each of the four seasons—in Spring, Autumn, Winter, and Summer, the Anglican Church observes what are called "Ember Days"—"ember" simply being the old English word for "season." At those four times, the Church prays for the increase of Christian ministry; oftentimes, it is during Ember Days that ordinations are held. Postulants and seminarians write letters to their bishops, informing them of their progress and asking for their prayers. The Winter Ember Days always fall near Advent III, so it is natural that our calendar should bring the ministry and the sacraments to our attention, along with the Holy Scriptures, as a part of Christ's hidden advent in the Church.

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St. John's Anglican Church, Greensboro, North Carolina

Father Peter Joslyn

Usually, then, the homily for this Sunday becomes a reflection on the ministry and the sacraments, what St. Paul calls the “mysteries of God,” of which Christian ministers are to be faithful stewards. However, I want to take things in a little different direction this morning. While it is important to meditate on and celebrate the gracious provision that God has made to His Church in and through the apostolic ministry, I want to encourage all of us this morning to reflect on the work of the Church as a whole, as that mysterious kingdom of royal priesthood through whom God is communicated to the world at large. For, as it is the responsibility of Christian ministers to model the Lord Jesus in and among the faithful, becoming living icons of Christ, so this responsibility also rests, generally, on the whole Church in relation to those who are without the household of faith. The Church herself is to model Christ to an unbelieving world.

The emphasis in this morning's readings are on this prophetic office of the Church and Her ministry. Interestingly, we are not presented with any narrative from the Gospels or the Acts which deal with the Apostolic ministry established by Christ—something like the calling of the twelve, the sending out of the seventy, or the conversion of St. Paul. Instead, our attention is directed, both in the collect and the gospel, to the mysterious and disruptive figure of St. John the Baptist. A distant relative of our Lord, St. John was a Levite, born into a priest's family. Like his father, Zacharias, by inheritance John had a share in the ministry of the temple at Jerusalem, and the promise of a life characterized by respect and relative ease and comfort.

Instead, John turned himself into a walking sign of contradiction and protest. He lived in the desert borderlands of Israel, south of Jerusalem along the Jordan River. He dressed like a wild man, in a simple shirt of camel's hair with a leather belt. He ate bugs and honey, and He prophesied to the people. His message was more like bugs than honey—not exactly what a PR team would cook up to attract followers—yet we are told that the people flocked to him, convicted by his warnings, moved to repentance and amendment of life, inspired with the hope of the coming kingdom and king that John announces. He was unstinting in his criticism of religious hypocrisy and moral corruption, even when it was present in the places of power, in the Temple itself and in the courts of Herod, the king. And this unwavering commitment to preparing the way of the Lord eventually led to John's imprisonment, and, later, a death by beheading. It's in the context of that imprisonment that Christ's comments on John are taken from the gospel appointed for today.

There is an interesting continuity and parallel between the figure of both St. John Baptist, the forerunner of the Gospel, and St. Paul, the latest-born of the apostles, sent by Christ to declare His word before kings and governors. Both came from religious families and backgrounds, and both forsake comfort and respectability—John to the desert and the privations of an existence like that of the prophet Elijah, Paul to shipwreck, stoning, chains, and beating with rods. Both are imprisoned, and both beheaded by cruel and self-serving monarchs, Herod and Nero Caesar, respectively. And both the forerunner and the apostle of the Lord reflect the life and sacrifice of their Lord and Master. There is a connection here between John, the last prophet of the Old Testament, and the apostolic ministry of the New.

The Church then, the hidden advent of its Savior, exists in the world as did both the prophet and the apostle—as both prophet and apostle are preparing the way of the Lord. John did so for His first Advent. We, like St. Paul, are to do so for His second. We are to be a

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prophetic voice, crying in the wilderness, as did St. John: “Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand; Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” As if to remind us, these sentences are prescribed to open the morning office of daily prayer throughout Advent.

I want to close by encouraging us to reflect on the ways in which we are faithful, or perhaps could be more faithful, to mirror this prophetic ministry, which is on display to us in the Scriptures in the person of St. John. In calling the world to Christ, in *turning the hearts*, as our collect puts it, *of the disobedient toward the wisdom of the just*—i.e., of Him who is both Just and the Judge—in performing this ministry, it is true, we are involved in a work of both warning and persuasion. The Church in our nation, in our culture, and at this period in her history, has expended a great deal of energy, time, and resources in attempting to persuade with honey, and warning it does little at all. I think it may be time to give the bugs a try, that is, to witness more simply, starkly, and without compromise—to adopt, as it were, the Spirit of John the Baptist. In truth, in God's merciful providence and through the direction of His Holy Spirit, I believe that our Church, here and in this time, will soon have no other viable option—no other option than, if it will continue to be Christ's Church, to be as St. John was, to be a walking sign of contradiction, a prophetic voice of both judgment and promise, not in soft clothing, not living in king's houses, but standing at the borderlands, beckoning to repentance and faith.

This will not mean dressing in camel's hair or adopting a strange diet. But it will mean a willingness to stand somewhat apart, perhaps to attract attention through our peculiarity, a peculiarity borne out of speaking the truth, no matter to whom or at what cost. This is a difficult line to walk—and not only because it may prove uncomfortable. It is difficult, because, while we must be ready to stand in opposition to the world, we cannot forget that our ultimate message is one of hope and healing. There is some evidence, in the fact that John sends his questioning disciples to ask what they do of Christ—are you He, or do we seek another?—that either he or they are having difficulty walking this fine line. We call the world to leave the comfort and vanity of the houses of the kings of the earth. We summon it to what may seem, at first, a desert, like the desert of Jordan in which John baptized. But it is only because we have found, in the words of Isaiah, that the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose. The weak hands are strengthened, the fearful heart is comforted, the sight of the Spirit is given to those who are blind; the parched ground becomes a pool, and the thirsty land, springs of water.

This is the office of the whole Church—this is the ministry to which both the clergy and the laity are called—the calling of a weary and sick world to a place of recovery and healing. Let us pray and work to be found faithful witnesses, as ministers of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. I will end with the counsel of St. Paul to the church at Thessalonica, a short passage, but one that gives us our marching orders for this work. “Be at peace among yourselves. Warn them that are unruly, comfort the feebleminded, support the weak, be patient toward all men. See that none render evil for evil unto any man; but ever follow that which is good, both among yourselves, and to all men. Rejoice evermore. Pray without ceasing. In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you. Quench not the Spirit. Despise not prophesyings. Prove all things; hold fast that which is good. Abstain from all appearance of evil. And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.
+Amen.