

Homily for Advent IV

+ On this final Sunday in Advent, on the brink of Christmastide, we are invited to dwell, not on a presence or an arrival, but on an absence. It is an absence that needs to be filled, a blank space that must be drawn in. We have meditated, throughout the Advent season, on the “hidden Advent” of Christ, which is the mystery of His catholic Church, in which, as in the womb of the Blessed Virgin, Jesus Christ is being fashioned. Today, however, we are called to recognize, lest we lose sight of this great truth of the gospel, that this mystery, this hidden Advent, is not something that comes about, in the last analysis, through our own efforts, desires, or inclinations. True, we devote ourselves to the study of the Scriptures, seeking earnestly to be informed by them, that the Word of God in Christ should be revealed to us, incorporated in our outlook, our behavior, our wants and our aims. Also true, we labor to be faithful witnesses of Christ's coming kingdom, calling the world to the obedience—to wisdom and repentance—through both prophetic Word and celebrated Sacrament. We endeavor, as we have prayed throughout Advent, to put on this armament of light.

But now is the time to remember and to confess with St. John the Baptist that this Light shines of its own Power. It is not the Power of man but of God. This is an important, if sometimes painful truth, that we must keep in front of us. For there are two great obstacles which we ourselves bring to the Advent of our Lord—as the sage of Okefenokee Swamp once observed: “We have met the enemy, and he is Us.” The first is described in our collect. In it, we lament that, “through our sins and wickedness, we are sore let and hindered in running the race that is set before us.” The formation of Christ in His Church is, to put it mildly, an ambitious project. How will imperfection, corruption, perverse desire, malevolence, greed, envy, and every other monster lurking in the heart of man put on the perfection, immortality, justice, charity, selflessness, and faithfulness which has been manifested in the world through Jesus Christ, both God and Man? If we are honest with ourselves, then we will feel keenly the slowness of our progress toward this goal.

In fact, there will be a temptation, at times, to despair of the whole thing. “Sore let and hindered”—but let and hindered, if we make a thoroughly honest evaluation, by our own misdeeds, mis-calculations, and outright foolishness and waywardness. In that famous scene from Charles Dickens' little masterpiece, *A Christmas Carol*, the ghost of Jacob Marley appears to Scrooge bound and coiled about with chains and lock-boxes, a fantastical manifestation of his misspent life, motivated only by avarice, a prisoner now, forever, of its own mis-directed affections. To the living Scrooge, the tormented spirit makes the disturbing charge: “Or would you know the weight and length of the strong coil you bear yourself? It was as full and as heavy and as long as this, seven Christmas Eves ago. You have labored on it, since. It is a ponderous chain!” The collect bids us to consider this invisible weight. I think that the sensitive among us probably need no prompting to do so—in fact, for many today, the problem is one of over-sensitivity, a stare fixed on the burdens of our own insufficiencies and failures, a paralysis of regret and hopelessness. While the collect bids us recognize an absence, it does not command us to dwell on it in an unhealthy way.

But it's a fair question. What way out? How to proceed, to go forward, to run the race, if we are weighed down, almost immobile? We might protest: “I read the Scriptures, patiently, but

I seem to receive no comfort. I labor night and day to be a faithful witness to Christ, to bring the world to Him, and yet all around me I see disorder, injustice, want, sadness, confusion, and Christ's body, the Church herself, 'by schisms rent asunder, by heresies distressed,'" to quote +Fr. Samuel John Stone. But even this is to put the case in a stronger form than we, most likely, deserve. Rather, "I have endeavored to submit myself to the Word, but there has not been time. I have been distracted by a thousand other things, goals, and pursuits. It has proved too difficult, too uncomfortable, too personally costly or inconvenient, to maintain a faithful Christian witness. The whole thing seems impossible."

This brings us to the second obstacle, perhaps the more dangerous of the two. For the most dangerous obstacle is that which we do not and cannot see. Even our sinfulness and wickedness, while "invisible" in a certain sense, are ever-present and sensible to the honest soul. If they are not literally wrapped around us like Marley's chains, we feel them hanging there. But the last obstacle is our very sight, our sense, our understanding itself. The ultimate act of humility, the ultimate act of faith in a Power that is not our own, is, in fact, to own the very limitation and fundamental incompleteness of the merely human experience. The last and most complete humility, the final surrender to the Hidden Advent of Christ, is the sacrifice of our human heart to the design and will of God. It sounds pleasant, easy, comfortable—because we have repeated it over and over—but to truly allow that Peace of God which passeth all understanding to keep, to guard, to govern our minds and hearts—this is a surrender of terrifying vulnerability. It passes understanding—i.e., it cannot be reckoned or measured, predicted, accounted for. It defies terrestrial explanation. It stands among the Pharisees, but they know Him not. It troubles the court of Herod, and all Jerusalem with it; it wells from a stable cave in the boondocks of the Empire, to topple mighty Caesar from his throne. It conquers the world from a cross of shame.

This is the connection between John's confession, "I am not the Christ"—i.e., I am sinful, I am sore let and hindered—and His bold prophecy, "there is one, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose." Notice that he has nowhere answered the questions of the Pharisees—*Who are you? Why are you doing what you are doing?* Instead, he points to something coming, yet distant and altogether unknown. I am not Christ, but He is coming. The Lord is at hand. "I baptize with water," the evangelist, a different St. John, has the Baptist say here. The other evangelists add, "but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit, and with fire." St. John the Evangelist mysteriously leaves that part off. It is almost as if to emphasize the extremity of faith. *I know that what I am doing is incomplete. Nevertheless, I put my trust in the power of the Living God, Whose understanding passes mine.* This faith is extreme, intense, and yet, as we read last week, open in its very intensity to surprise, to the subversion of its own expectations. *Are you the Christ, or do we wait for another?*

To place ourselves truly in the hands of God, to give ourselves to His power, means that His peace—His *shalom*, in Hebrew, which means not "lack of conflict," but "wholeness"—takes the place of ours. Our self-conception of completion, of perfection, may be wholly different than His. "God has a plan for your life," some people are fond of saying, but the cliché is kitschy and woefully falls short of the profound possibility implied by it. We believe and entrust ourselves to the power of God—in the faith that this Power will work in us for good, again in the words of our collect, in trust that "He will speedily help and deliver us." But we must remain open to the shock and peculiar shape of His aid and deliverance. His ways are not our ways.

SERMON – THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN ADVENT – 23 DECEMBER 2018

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

Father Peter Joslyn

We ought to approach the Divine inworking of this Hidden Advent as we approach the birth and nurture of a child—and the approaching season of Christmastide explicitly urges this upon us. It is foolish for parents to say, when expecting a new birth—that which is to be born will be a lawyer, a doctor, this kind of person, or that. Yet I believe that we do this, even in our Faith, when approaching the work of God's sanctifying grace in our own lives. We expect that it will take this form or that. We nearly always "define Sanctity down," or handcuff, at least mentally, that Peace which would be ours, if only we were truly to let it pass the narrow bounds of our understanding, our small expectations, and our limited desires. Let us rather, as Christ's own mother, approach the arrival of the Savior with a pondering and treasuring heart, rejoicing indeed, and yet ready and open to the sword that may pierce our own souls also. Only then will we run the race to its completion. Then will we allow Him who shall come after us—Christ formed through the working of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, renewing our mind, passing our understanding—then will He come, to be preferred before us. Let us diminish, that He may increase, + Amen.