



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Sermon for Third Sunday in Advent 1 Corinthians 4:1-5 & St. Matthew 11:2-10

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Last Sunday Bishop Dorrington, at the end of his sermon, asked us: “What are you going to do this Advent to prepare the way of the Lord?” He offered us a timely reminder that Advent is about *preparation*. At Christmas we remember the first coming of our Lord, but that first coming is in the *past*. The whole world now waits for his second coming in the *future*. The problem is that most of the world is either oblivious to the return of Jesus or just doesn’t care. Advent reminds us that as Jesus’ people, we have work to do between his first coming—his first *advent*—and his second. When his work on earth was finished—after he had sacrificed his own life on the cross, taking on himself the death we deserve in order to pay the penalty for our sins, and after he had risen from the dead, showing himself to the conqueror of sin and death, he ascended to heaven where he sits at the right hand of the Father. And yet Jesus still has work to do here. He established his kingdom and now he reigns over it, but he’s given us—his people—the task of building his kingdom and carry his offer of peace with God to the world. He came to earth and made salvation possible. He now calls us to spread his Good News and to carry the transforming power of the Holy Spirit to all those who are still living in darkness.

That mission: our calling to be the hands and feet of Jesus here on earth, is what Advent is all about.

The Epistle for the first Sunday in Advent reminded us that we each need to be personally prepared. St. Paul called to us:

You know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. (Romans 13:11-12)

Last Sunday—the Second in Advent—the lessons showed that we are best prepared to do the work of the Kingdom by steeping ourselves in the Word—in the Scriptures. In the Gospel, we read Jesus’ words as he warned his disciples of that great time of tribulation that would come later in their generation as the young Church was persecuted by the Jews. That time of tribulation would lead up to his coming in judgement on those who had rejected him as Messiah. And yet Jesus also gave his assurance: as new shoots of growth on the trees herald the coming of summer, so the tribulation of the saints heralds the coming of the kingdom of God. The Epistle reminded us, as we suffer our own trials and tribulations and as the Church faces new persecutions as we await Jesus’ return, that:

Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. (Romans 15:4)

The Scriptures remind us of God’s promise, of his faithfulness to his promises, and give us hope and direction as we do the work of his kingdom in this in-between time. If we want to be prepared, we need to let Scripture prepare us.

And yet there’s more to the Christian life than steeping ourselves in the Word written. Next Sunday, the Fourth in Advent, we put our attention on the need to steep ourselves in the Word Incarnate—on our need to let Jesus himself prepare us. But first, on this Third Sunday in Advent, our lessons point us to the need to be prepared by the Church. If the Scriptures contain God’s message, it’s the Church that teaches it to us and gives us a place to learn the message by doing it.

Consider this Advent, that as we prepare, we need these three all together: the Word, the Church, and Jesus himself. Too many Christians are prone to focusing exclusively on one or two and dropping the others. Some people are active in Church, but they leave Jesus out of it. For them Church isn’t much more than a social club or a place for do-gooders to get together. If that’s where you’re at, you’re not going to be prepared when Jesus returns. A lot of other people are committed to the Church and committed to letting Jesus prepare them, but they leave out the Word. As a pastor, it’s always disturbing to me to see the latest poll results on Christians and their life in and with the Bible. The polls show Christians reporting that the vast majority rarely read their Bibles, let alone truly study, meditate on, and memorise what’s in them. Dear friends, if we aren’t steeped in the Word, we can never truly know Jesus as we should and we’ll struggle with the work of the Church. The Word is our field guide, our instruction manual, and our handbook to life in Christ.

But then there are other people who seem to be happily committed to Jesus—and a few of them happily committed to their Bibles—but who will have nothing to do with the Church. They’re loner Christians. “Me, my Bible, and Jesus!”

“Organised religion isn’t for me.”
“Churches are full of hypocrites!”
“I’ve been burned by churches in the past.” We’ve all heard things like that. And yet, brothers and sisters, if we claim to love Jesus but despise his body, we’re liars. And if we think that somehow we can exist as Christians apart from the Church, just reading our Bibles at home to learn God’s truth, we’re using only one eye when God has given us two. Again, God speaks through the Word, but he also speaks through his Church and it’s through the Church that the Holy Spirit makes his impact on the world. The Church is the body of Christ, but it’s the creation of the Spirit. Have you ever thought about that?

It’s the Holy Spirit who turns out corrupt and fallen hearts to Christ in the first place. It’s the Spirit who gives us faith to trust Jesus. It’s the Spirit whom God then pours into us as we trust in Christ as Saviour and affirm him as Lord. It’s the Spirit who grafts us into Christ and gives us new life. It’s the Spirit who renews our minds. It’s the Spirit who produces new and holy fruit in our lives. It’s the Spirit who sovereignly gives us the gifts we use to build up the body of Christ. It’s a circle. The Spirit brings us in and makes us an integral and contributing part of the body and we then go out in the power of the Spirit and bring others in that they might join us.

Last year I republished Francis Hall’s ten-volume *Dogmatic Theology*, a massive work of Anglican doctrine and teaching. A Charismatic friend of mine was looking at the titles of the volumes and commented with surprise and shock that there were volumes on the being and attributes of God, several volumes on the person and work of Christ, but there was no volume on

the Holy Spirit. He was sure that Hall had missed something huge. But I pulled down the large volume on the Church—one of the longest in the series—and showed him the chapter headings. Hall didn’t miss a theology of the Holy Spirit. It’s all right there, but it’s in a place where a lot of modern Christians don’t think to look: in the Church. Friends, the Church is as vital for our preparation as the Word is. They both belong to Jesus. Ultimately they both come from and are connected to Jesus. And Jesus works vitally in each of us through both Word and Church. We cannot be vibrantly alive in Jesus Christ without being steeped in *both* his Word and his Church!

Our lessons today get at this idea by giving us a glimpse of what it means to be ministers of Jesus and to those who proclaim his kingdom both in the Church and in the world. The Epistle is taken from 1 Corinthians 4 and is part of a longer passage in which St. Paul defends himself against the attacks of some of the people in the Corinthian church. Paul had founded that church as a missionary and he had taught the Corinthians the faith. And yet as problems started arising in the Corinthian church and Paul wrote to correct them, the people rejected Paul and his apostleship. They wouldn’t listen. In the passage put before us today, St. Paul describes his role and duty as a minister of Jesus Christ. He writes to them saying:

This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. (1 Corinthians 4:1)

This is Paul talking about himself, but what he says of himself is also true of all of us who minister in the name of Jesus and under his authority. We are, Paul says,

“servants of Christ” and “stewards of the mysteries of God”.

“Servants” and “stewards”: these are two words loaded with meaning. What does it mean to be a servant? The Greek word that Paul uses is *huperetas*. The first time we know of this word’s use is in Homer’s *Illiad*. It literally means “under-rowers”. It doesn’t refer to galley slaves. It refers to the warriors who were off to battle, but had to row their own war galleys to get there. Think of the story of the Greek armies setting sail for Troy in their warships: the captain was up on deck and he would call out his commands and then a big burly guy down with the rowers would call out those instructions to the rowers and beat his drum:

boom...boom...boom...boom...battle speed. And then he’d speed up: ramming speed. You guys have seen that in the movies. Under-rowers. Later this term that we translate as “servant” was used to describe Hermes, the messenger of the gods, who would fly off with his winged sandals to carry the gods’ messages to mortals on earth. Eventually it came to refer to anyone, but especially those in the army, who were responsible for seeing that the orders of the commanding officers were carried out. And interestingly, it also referred to the officers in the army who were responsible for equipping the troops for battle. St. Luke tells us in Acts that when Paul and Barnabas went on their first missionary journey, they took John Mark with them as their “servant” – as their *huperetas* – the guy who made their travel arrangements, looked after their baggage, ran their errands, and basically did what they told him to do.

St. Paul was a servant of Christ—an under-rower working to get the team to battle, a faithful messenger of his

master, and someone who took care of things so that his master's work was done. Paul wanted to make it clear to the Corinthians that when he came to them with a rebuke, he wasn't somehow lording his own authority over them. It had nothing to do with pride in the fact that Jesus had picked him to be an apostle. It was all about him being a servant of their common master. Paul didn't pick Jesus; Jesus picked him and entrusted him with a duty and with certain gifts for the building up of the Church. Did he have special authority given by Christ? Yes. But did that make him different from everyone else doing the work and rowing the ship? No.

In this sense we're all "servants" of Christ. He has chosen and called each of us. He's given each of us his Spirit. He's gifted us all uniquely. And he's done that so that each of us can fill a position in his body. Each of us has his or her oar to pull as we all row the ship together. And the more we work together, the more we recognise how valuable our brothers and sisters are, the more we acknowledge the gifts that the Spirit has given them, and the more we work together, as the writer of Hebrews says, "stir[ing] up one another to love and good works, [and] not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near" (Hebrews 10:24-25). Being an active part of the Church is essential to our preparation for the return of Jesus.

But what about that other word? Paul also describes himself as a "steward of the mysteries of God". A steward was someone, usually in a large household, who was put in charge of the master's affairs and possessions when he was away. And so not only are we servants of Christ,

but we're also stewards of the mysteries of God—custodians of the truths that Jesus left for his Church: the knowledge of God and the Good News of the forgiveness of sins through faith in Jesus and his cross.

Slacking off in these duties isn't an option. Paul says in verse 2:

Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful.

Why was he going to so much trouble to write to the very people in Corinth who had rejected his apostleship? Sometimes ministry feels like you're walking across a field of rakes. God calls you to walk forward, but every time you take a step, something hits you in the face. And that's not just true for clergy. We're all human and it's in our fallen nature to sin, to be loners, to be full of pride, and to turn on our brothers and sisters who are doing their best to turn away from sin, to mature in the faith, and to stir us up to love and good works. And yet Paul reminds us: giving up isn't an option. Keep ministering and keep working to fulfil Christ's call no matter how hard. "It is required of stewards that they be found faithful." Our Lord and Master is coming back. We have a short time, whether that's the four or five score years most of us have here before death or whether Jesus returns in our lifetime. The time is short and he has given us much to do. We need to be faithful with the gifts he's given in the time he's given.

The Gospel points to John the Baptist as an example for us to follow. He was the last of the Old Covenant prophets. God had called him to preach repentance and the soon coming of the Kingdom. But John's faithful preaching got him in trouble with King Herod, whose

marriage was incestuous. In today's Gospel we read that from prison, John sent some of his disciples to Jesus to ask him whether or not he was truly the Messiah whose coming he had proclaimed. We don't know exactly why John did this. Most modern commentators think that John was beginning to doubt. He'd been proclaiming that Jesus was the promised Messiah come to set the people free and yet he, John, had ended up in prison for it and was facing a death sentence. And Jesus certainly didn't seem to be doing any of the things the people expected of the Messiah. He was supposed to come and kick out the Romans and restore the old kingdom of David and Solomon. Instead, Jesus was travelling around the countryside with a bunch of former tax collectors and fishermen, teaching about peacemaking and turning the other cheek. Maybe John was beginning to have his doubts about who Jesus was, so he sent his disciples to simply ask Jesus, point blank: "Are you *really* the Messiah?"

Jesus pointed John's disciples to his own works:

"Go and tell John what you hear and see: 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." (Matthew 11:4-5)

Jesus confirmed his own role and identity, but apparently the crowds began to question John's integrity as a prophet. "John," they asked, "The firebrand in the wilderness who declared with confidence that Jesus is the promised Messiah; the one who declared with confidence that the Kingdom is at hand—that John—is now *doubting* all that?"

And Jesus rebuked them and affirmed that the prophet they had seen, the prophet with unfaltering faith, was a faithful minister:

“What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings’ houses. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written,

“Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.’ (Matthew 11:7-10)

John the Baptist was no reed shaken by the wind in his preaching. He stood firm in the conviction that the message he had been given to preach was from God. He stood firm in the conviction that his ministry stood for something in the Kingdom. He stayed at his oar, even when the storm raged and even when others gave up the ship, because he was convinced of the importance of fulfilling the call God had given to him. For the sake of his ministry, he gave up soft clothes and the good life. For the sake of his ministry he wore rough clothes and ate locusts in the wilderness. For the sake of his ministry he made sacrifices. And because he was faithful, Jesus affirmed him in his ministry: John was truly the prophet he was called to be. In fact, he had been called above and beyond the role of a mere prophet. And in his ministry he had gone above and beyond. We’re reminded of St. Paul’s final words in our Epistle:

Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in

darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God. (1 Corinthians 4:5)

When the Lord Jesus returns, he will expose our works and commend those who have been faithful servants and stewards. That doesn’t mean that our salvation somehow depends on how well faithfully we’ve used our gifts within the Church and for the Kingdom, but it does mean that God expects us to be diligently doing the work of his Kingdom. He’s give us all gifts to build up his Church; he’s made sure that each of us has a place to do our work within his body; and he’s given a short time in which to do that work. If it sounds like a chore, well, sometimes it is. Again, Kingdom work is often hard work. And yet if we are truly in Christ, if we are living each day in his mercy and grace, each day plumbing the depths of his amazing love for us, every day confessing our sins and marvelling at the God who loved us enough to sacrifice his own Son for us—for the very people who despised him and rebelled against him—if we live each day rejoicing in our salvation and in him who has bought it, the trials and tribulations of Kingdom ministry themselves become a joy. Pulling at the oars doesn’t seem quite so hard and when the storm comes and we fight against the waves, he know that we do so side by side with brothers and sisters who aren’t going to give up on us. We know that as a result of our work, new souls will be plucked from the stormy waters, saved from death and brought to life. And we fight through that storm confident in the knowledge that on the other side awaits our reward: an eternity of fellowship with our Lord, who is himself the Prince of Peace.

Let us pray: Lord Jesus Christ, who at your first coming sent your messenger John the Baptist to prepare the way for you, grant that the ministers and stewards of your mysteries may so make ready your way, by turning the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, that at your second coming to judge the world, we may be found an acceptable people in your sight; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.