



# LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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## The Third Sunday in Advent:

### Faithful Stewards

### 1 Corinthians 4:1-5 &

### St. Matthew 11:2-10

Fr. William Klock

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As Advent continues, our lessons continue to call us to be prepared. Christ has died. Christ is risen. And Christ will come again—to finally bring to completion what he began that first Christmas and that first Easter. And as we continue with this theme of being prepared, our lessons today focus our attention on the faithfulness of God’s ministers. The Epistle focuses on St. Paul and the Gospel on John the Baptist. The choice of lessons is linked to the Ember Days. They fall later this week. You all know what the Ember Days are, right? The Embers Days come around four times a year and, at least historically, they were the traditional times for ordinations. So with that in mind, our advent lessons today call the clergy to faithfulness to our mission and remind the Church of the importance of faithful ministers. But even though today’s focus is on what we might call “professional” ministers, there’s a broader application for all of us, because, Brothers and Sisters, never forget that every Christian is a steward and minister of the gospel. We’re all ministers and as our Declaration of Principles makes abundantly clear, Christian ministers are not “priests” in any other sense than that in which all believers are what Peter called a “royal priesthood”.

So let’s start with our Epistle, 1 Corinthians 4:1-5. And we’ll want a little background to understand it. The Church at Corinth had a lot of problems and a big part of it was that some of them were having trouble setting aside their old, pagan ways.

They had compromised much. There were some serious sins in the church that needed to be dealt with, but weren’t. People were justifying them by appealing to Christian liberty. Some of them were even patting themselves on the back for their tolerance. (There’s nothing new under the sun, is there?) There were also divisions within the congregation. Paul had founded this church, but the people didn’t want to listen to him anymore. They’d become enamored of other preachers. As far as we know these other preachers were faithful to the gospel. The problem in Corinth doesn’t seem to have been their fault. The problem was that Paul was about the least flashy person you could imagine and when other preachers came along who were more attractive and who were better speakers than Paul—that was something the Greeks put a lot of value on—the church kicked Paul to the curb. That, and they didn’t like him trying to hold them accountable. Not only would they not listen to him, he wasn’t even welcome anymore. They judged him a loser. That’s what’s behind our Epistle today. Let’s read:

**This is how we should be thought of, as servants of the Messiah and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful. But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I am not aware of anything standing against me, but that isn’t what vindicates me. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time when the Lord comes. He will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will lay bare the intentions of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God.**

I’ve always wondered how hard it was for Paul to write this, especially the bit about “This is how we should be thought of: I’m a servant of the Messiah and a steward of God’s

mysteries.” Good clergymen tend to err on the side of humility, even to a fault. The only guys I’ve ever known to say things like this have been egotists who never should have been in ministry in the first place. But Paul had one advantage that only the apostles had and that was that they had known Jesus in the flesh and had been commissioned by him personally. I can’t say that and neither can anyone else alive today. That said, there is a place for God’s stewards to assert their calling in the face of unjust judgement. Most pastors, when faced with unjust criticism just nod humbly, say nothing, and take it to God, but Paul reminds us that there is a time to speak up against these kinds of judgements. And not just “pastors”. I think this goes for every Christian. We’re all ministers of the gospel, but we live in an age that is becoming increasingly hostile to the gospel and to gospel people. Sometimes the criticisms we receive can be justified. Sometimes Christians and sometimes churches have failed and done awful things. But those are the outliers. Most of the criticism we face comes from people who hate Jesus and the message of the cross, who don’t want to hear about sin and don’t want to repent, who have their own ideas of what the world should be like and only want new creation on their terms, not God’s. Jesus warned us this would happen, but most of us still aren’t prepared for the attacks. And so even though we’re ministers of the gospel and stewards of the mysteries of God, all too often we let the false judgements and accusations of pagans back us out of the room. We go silently and sit facing the corner like scolded children—and I think a lot of the time we actually feel guilty when we hear these accusations, even though we know better.

Brothers and Sisters, Paul stresses that ministers are to be found faithful. That goes for apostles and for pastors and for all of us. Yes, we need to weigh criticism. We need to ask if there’s anything to it. Sometimes there may be. Maybe we’re not being

faithful to Jesus' instructions and we need to hear it. But Jesus' instructions aren't hard to understand or discern. As a minister, I'm called to preach the word, especially the gospel about Jesus, and to administer the sacraments. It's not quite that simple, but that is the core. And for all of us, we're called to proclaim the gospel about Jesus to the world around us and to live in a way that accords with being the people of God. We proclaim Jesus and we live the life—the fruit—of the Spirit.

We need to reflect on our lives in light of that and ask if we're being faithful. This is one of the reasons we need to steep ourselves in God's word. If we don't know what God expects, how will we be faithful? It's a bit like a bread recipe—one of the simplest things in the world. But first you have to read it and then you have to follow it. Start changing things up and you spoil the bread. But that's what we all too often do. It's not that we're not well-intentioned. We want to see things happen, but sometime we get impatient. We take shortcuts. Or we think we can make better bread by changing the recipe. People out there don't like to hear about sin, so we'll tone that part of our preaching down. People out there don't like commitment, so we'll make church commitment-free. People out there don't like liturgy and sermons, so we'll have a rock concert and preach pop-psychology instead. People don't feel like getting up on Sunday mornings and driving to church, so we'll broadcast it to their TVs and computers instead. We're not confident in the power of the gospel and the Spirit to change hearts and to bring them to Jesus, so we instead build churches around programmes and activities that people do want or we use manipulative techniques to get them to believe. We make the gospel about them and not so much about Jesus and the glory of God. These things can and often do bring short-term gains, but in the long-term they've been a disaster. We wonder

why people won't commit, why they're still worldly, why we're losing our children, and why we're seen as increasingly irrelevant. It's like we've tried to bake bread by replacing the flour with glitter. The end product might look exciting, but in the end it's not only unable to nourish, it's slowly poisoning us. In contrast, the real work of the gospel is rarely flashy. Sometimes it brings persecution and even martyrdom. It means relying on God, not ourselves. And it means being in it for the long-haul. Consider Israel. God called Abraham and it was two thousand years before Israel's story culminated with Jesus. And the in-between was as full of hardship, slavery, judgement, and exile as it was prosperity and growth. And that was God working with a single, small people. Brothers and Sisters, our mission is the world.

So be faithful to the gospel, build churches around word and sacrament, pray and fellowship together, raise covenant children who know Jesus. Proclaim the good news and call your friends and family and neighbours to take up their crosses daily and to follow Jesus. And let them see *you* do it—when it's a joy to follow Jesus *and* when you struggle to bear that cross. And as we do that, remember that the judgement that matters is not the judgement of other people or the world, but of God. That doesn't mean we shouldn't have an ear to the ground. That doesn't mean we shouldn't listen to the world's judgements. Sometimes we need to know how the world sees us—even if it's false—so that we can better know what we're up against. So that we can better respond with the gospel. And, sometimes, the world's rebukes may have some truth to them. Jesus promised that his people would be persecuted for his sake, but we need to make sure that we're actually being persecuted for his sake and for our faithfulness to his word. I know some Christians who claim they're being persecuted, but when you get down to it, it's just that people don't like them

because they're jerks, not because they're preaching Jesus. People will still hate us for preaching Jesus, but Friends, we do need to be sure that as we preach Jesus and as we stand firmly on the Scriptures that the world rejects, we remain committed to being a godly people in every respect. We need to live the gospel as much as we preach the gospel. We're to announce God's judgement on sin, yes, but we're also to announce God's mercy to repentant sinners.

So that's the Epistle. Let's turn over to today's Gospel in Matthew 11 as we continue with this theme. Again, what does it look like to be gospel ministers who are prepared. John the Baptist. In the Gospel, John has gone from announcing the coming kingdom and baptising people in the Jordan to being locked up in prison. He got there by way of criticizing Herod. It wasn't just some off-the-wall criticism. Tied up with his announcement of the kingdom was John's denouncement of Herod for marrying his former sister-in-law. Herod couldn't help but draw a connection between John's fiery preaching and himself. If John was saying that the King was soon to come, it meant John was saying that Herod wasn't really the king. So poor John is now in Herod's dungeon and he's frustrated and confused. He'd been faithful in his divine calling to herald the coming Messiah—his cousin, Jesus—and he's landed in prison. No big surprise there. He wasn't the first prophet to offend a king and end up in prison. But Jesus—*the Messiah*—was on the outside, preaching, teaching, healing, forgiving, having dinner with tax collectors and sinners...and leaving John to rot. Something was wrong with Jesus' priorities, or so John was beginning to think. We'll pick up from there:

**Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to**

**come, or shall we look for another?”**  
(St. Matthew 11:2-10)

I don't think John was really doubting whether Jesus was the Messiah. I think this was his way of saying, "Um...Jesus. Shouldn't the Messiah be getting his faithful herald out prison?" Of course, that also meant all the other things to go along with it. A simple jailbreak wouldn't do. The jailbreak would have to be part of a wholesale overthrow of Herod and the Romans—which, of course, is what most people expected the Messiah to do. Here's what Jesus says to John's men in return:

**“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. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.”** (Matthew 11:5-6)

You see, John expected the Messiah to be like Elijah, confronting the prophets of Baal and calling down fire from heaven. John wanted to see fire and brimstone. There is a place for that. In a sense John wasn't wrong. Jesus is the Judge and, you can be sure, he will judge the world and everyone in it. There will be a time for fire and brimstone and judgement. I suspect that being a fire-and-brimstone sort of prophet—and that is what John was called to be so there's nothing wrong with that—I suspect that being that kind of guy means that you get a little fixated on judgement. And Jesus responds by saying something like, "You expected Elijah...and you've got Elijah...but before I come in judgement, there are a lot of people...people like the widow of Zerahath...people who need to know God's mercy." As Jesus says in John's Gospel: "I came not to condemn, but to redeem." Brothers and Sisters, remember: Sinners already stand condemned. Judgement is coming. Announcing that judgement and calling people to

repentance was John's mission. But before the judgement comes, what Israel needed most was to know God's mercy, to know his salvation. This is why Jesus' road to the throne had to be by way of the cross.

So Jesus corrects John. He sets him straight about the Messiah. But he then turns to the crowd and praises John:

**As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: “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)

Even though Jesus' mission was one of humility and of mercy, Jesus praises the faithfulness of John to his ministry as the fiery herald of judgement. Again, John was expecting the Messiah to come like Elijah, bringing confrontation and fire from heaven, but what Jesus says—albeit a little obliquely for reasons that get beyond our lesson today—what Jesus says here is that John is the prophet like Elijah. John is the fire-and-brimstone preacher. John is the herald announcing judgement and calling the people to repentance. Jesus quotes from Malachi 3 and confirms two things: John is truly the one sent to herald the Messiah and, two, that means that Jesus truly is the Messiah—the one whom Malachi said would come both to refine Israel and to make her offerings pleasing to the Lord *and* to judge the unrepentant.

Now, in the short-term this was bad news for John. It was bad news for Jesus, too. Both the Messiah and his

herald would be put to death. But death was not the end. As it turns out, we know, it was by the death of Jesus that deliverance was bought and in his resurrection he was vindicated and the unjust verdict on him overturned. In his resurrection and his ascension, Jesus was confirmed as the Messiah, as Lord. In that we see the faithfulness of God to his promises and knowing God's faithfulness, we have hope. As St. Paul wrote to the Romans: "If we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall surely be united with him in a resurrection like his" (Romans 6:5). This is one of those parts of the gospel that we often prefer to ignore or to leave out of our preaching, because it offends. We've sort of got the opposite problem John had. John was fixated on judgement and on fire from heaven. Like so many Jews, he wanted to see God vanquish Israel's enemies and he nearly forgot about God's mercy. Our problem is the opposite. We've become so afraid of preaching about sin and about judgement, that we can't even preach mercy and grace anymore—because mercy isn't mercy and grace isn't grace if we're not guilty of anything and if there is no judgement headed this way. And if we gut our preaching of mercy and grace, we can talk all day about the love of God, but there will be no depth to it. We will make the cross of Jesus pointless. Why? Because we can only begin to plumb the great depths of God's love when we see that he gave his Son to die for our sake—for the sake of sinners who would otherwise stand condemned to destruction.

And that brings us back to the recipe for bread. Brothers and Sisters, bread is simple and often kind of boring. But if you make it right, it nourishes. It keeps us alive. There's a reason why Jesus used it as a metaphor for himself when he said, "I am the bread of life." There's a reason why it's a symbol over and over in the story of God's people for his faithful care and sustenance. And it points to the way God works and the way his gospel and

his word work in the world. It's hardly ever flashy. And you have to be patient, because it takes time to rise and it takes time to bake. But like the Messiah, who humbled himself to take on lowly human flesh, who humbled himself to be born of a lowly virgin, and who humbly went to death on a cross, the simple bread of the gospel, the good news that Jesus died, that he rose, and that he is Lord, brings life to the world. To preach it faithfully means to preach it whole and to preach it pure. Friends, be faithful stewards. Stick to the recipe. Preach the Lord Jesus, crucified and risen to give forgiveness and life to sinners. Pursue holiness. Build churches centred on the faithful preaching of God's word and the administration of the sacraments, where, knowing God's faithfulness, God's people sing and pray together, where they raise covenant, gospel children, where we live as people who know the hope of God's life in the age to come.

Let's pray: O Lord Jesus Christ, who at your first coming sent your messenger to prepare your way before you: grant that the ministers and stewards of your mysteries may likewise so prepare and 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; who lives and reigns with the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*