



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Advent Philippians 4:4-7 & St. John 1:19-28 Fr. William Klock

December 21, 2025

For the last few months I've been reading Tom Holland's book *Dominion*. (That's Tom Holland the historian, not the actor. Until recently I didn't even know there was an actor because, I guess, I'm a history nerd.) Anyway, I've been reading a chapter here and a chapter there in between reading other more important things and it's been worthwhile. Holland isn't a Christian, but this rather large book is nevertheless about the influence that the Gospel, the good news about Jesus, has had in shaping Western Civilisation. One of the points he stresses is just how brutal and barbaric the ancient world was. Greeks and Romans knew little of mercy and grace. Theirs was a dog-eat-dog world. It was cruel. The weak were something to be exploited and if they couldn't be exploited, they were a liability and left to fend for themselves. Nearly a third of the people of the Roman empire were slaves. Infants were routinely left to die of exposure. Sexual immorality was everywhere and was a central part of the worship of many gods. Marital fidelity, especially amongst the wealthy and powerful was uncommon. Think of the pagan gods of Greece and Rome we learned about in school: petty, capricious, fickle, unloyal, angry, and constantly fighting amongst themselves. These were the gods the Greeks and the Romans created in their own image. Whatever problems we see in our world—and it's getting worse the deeper we drift from the Gospel and return to paganism—but however bad you think our world is, theirs was worse. Brother and Sisters, the gospel has had a profound impact on our world. And even as gospel virtues go to seed in the secular world and we have distorted and perverted version of love and mercy and justice thrown at us, the very fact that

anyone at all in our society cares about things like justice, is because of the powerful impact of the gospel.

It's appropriate that Advent comes to us at the darkest time of the year, because it reminds us of the darkness of the world into which Jesus was born. Surrounded by those pagans, Israel had the light of God's law, but even then, Israel lived in darkness. They'd returned from their Babylonian exile five hundred years before, but the Lord had never returned to his temple. The priests kept the lamp lit in the temple—the lamp symbolic of the Lord's presence with his people, but behind the great and heavy curtain, the holy of holies was empty. And Israel was ruled by a series of pagan empires: the Persians, the Greeks, and then the Romans. But Israel had her story. They were the people whom the Lord had delivered from slavery in Egypt. They knew his character and they knew his faithfulness. And they knew his promises. They had faith. And so they lived in hope and expectant longing. One day the words of Isaiah—the ones we read in our Old Testament lesson—“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.” One day those words would be fulfilled. And, most people were pretty sure, that day was coming soon. That's the setting for today's Gospel, which begins at John 1:19.

This is the testimony John [the Baptist] gave when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, “I am *not* the Messiah.” “What then?” they asked him, “Are you Elijah?” “I am not,” he replied. “Are you the Prophet?” And he answered, “No.” “Well, then who *are* you?” they said. “We've got to take an answer back to those who sent us. Who do you claim to be?” He said, “I am ‘a voice calling in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord,’ just as the prophet Isaiah said.” (John 1:19-28)

So the priests were the spiritual gatekeepers of Israel and when they

heard of this prophet, John, preaching and baptising, they sent their people to ask him what he was about—to see if he was legit. People were talking about John like he was the Messiah—as if he were the one come to fulfil the prophecies of deliverance and salvation. Was John the one?

So they ask, “Who are you? Who do you claim to be? Elijah?” Remember that the Prophet Elijah had never died; he was swept up into have by a fiery chariot. And Malachi had prophesied that “before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes” the Lord would send Elijah back. Like King Arthur returning to Britain in its hour of greatest need. But John says, “No. I'm not Elijah.” He hadn't come to earth in a fiery chariot. He was the son of Zechariah the priest and his wife, Elizabeth.

“Are you the prophet?” they asked. In Deuteronomy 18 the Lord had promised that he would one day raise up a prophet like Moses, who would declare his words. Many people thought this prophet would be the Messiah. But again John answers, “Nope, I'm not the prophet either.” We get a sense of just how great the longing of these people was. Like a kid getting up every morning of December and asking his parents if it's Christmas yet, the people of Israel longed for the Messiah to come and set the world to rights, to end the darkness, to once again fill the temple with the glory of the Lord.

John was as eager as anyone, but he tells them “No, I'm not the Prophet.” In fact, John *was* fulfilling those prophecies—Matthew and Mark tell us as much. But I think John denied it because he knew people associated the prophecies of Elijah and the Prophet with the Messiah. John knew he wasn't the Messiah; he was the Messiah's herald. And so when the priests finally let him speak for himself, he quotes Isaiah 40:3, and says, “I am ‘a voice calling in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord.’” In other words, John was indeed fulfilling prophecy—not as the Messiah, but as the one sent to prepare Israel to receive the Messiah.

And that surprised those priests. People in the past had claimed to be the

Messiah. No one claimed to be his herald. That was weird. So they dig deeper. Look at verses 25-27:

They continued to question him, “So why are you baptising, if you aren’t the Messiah, or Elijah, or the Prophet?” John answered them, “I’m baptising with water, but there is one standing among you whom you do not know—someone who is to come after me. I’m not worthy to untie his sandal straps.”

For the Jews, baptism was a symbol of cleansing and of ritual purity. It was a ritual washing. At this point the other gospel-writers are helpful as they expand on John’s answer. Mark tells us that John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance—it was a preparatory act in light of the coming judgement the Messiah would bring. And Matthew and Luke also report John going on about this one who will come, this one greater than him: “He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire” (Matthew 3:11, Luke 3:16). In other words, John is calling Israel to repentance in anticipation of the Messiah, who will fulfil the Lord’s promises to set Israel to rights by filling his people with his own Spirit. The law written on stone tablets would be inscribed on the hearts of God’s people so that they could finally fulfil his law of love. But the Messiah was also coming in judgement. He would baptise the repentant with God’s own Spirit, but he would baptise unrepentant Israel with fire.

These are the two sides of the gospel coin. You can’t have one without the other. Jesus’ advent, on the one hand, brought mercy to the repentant, but on the other it also brought judgement on the unrepentant of Israel. What’s important for us here, Brothers and Sisters, is that this exchange between John and the priests reminds us of the Messiah’s place in Israel’s story and of the faithfulness of God to his promises. It is this manifestation of the Lord’s faithfulness (and of his goodness, mercy, grace, and wisdom) to Israel—something we see brought to its climax in the birth, the death, the resurrection,

and the ascension of Jesus, that has drawn *us*—you and I—to the God of Israel and that, by faith, has incorporated us into the people of God. Through our union with Jesus, through our incorporation into this people, through our being made adopted sons and daughters of Abraham, you and I have come to know God’s mercy and the life of the Spirit, too. Because of the faithfulness of God, revealed in Jesus and in the power of the gospel, the darkness that Israel knew; that deep, deep darkness full of false gods and wicked kings and evil principalities and powers has been driven away by the light. The light has come into the darkness, his gospel has thrown those powers down and lit up the world. And you and I have seen—we live in—the glory of that light. And knowing that takes us from our Gospel passage today into our Epistle. Paul writes those wonderful and challenging words in Philippians 4:4:

Rejoice in the Lord always; I say again, rejoice.

Paul spoke these words to a people surrounded by the dark. “Rejoice in the Lord always!” Because being surrounded by the dark, it’s awfully easy to forget the light of the gospel. Just before he wrote this, Paul exhorted two women in the Philippian church, Euodia and Syntyche, to “agree in the Lord”. These two sisters in the Messiah, once close, once working together in gospel life had some kind of falling out. We don’t know the details, but it was something important enough to prompt Paul to address them publicly. They’d let the darkness extinguish their light. Instead of standing as a witness to the victory of Jesus over the principalities and powers of the present wicked age, the local church was letting those powers have their way in their midst. Brothers and Sisters, don’t let that happen. Paul exhorts them (and us) instead:

Let everyone know how gentle and gracious you are. (Philippians 4:5a)

Gentle and gracious. Paul uses the same description in 2 Corinthians 10 to

describe the meekness of Jesus as a model for Christians. This is gospel light lived out. What Paul’s getting at is that Jesus *is* the King, but in him we see this amazing display of gracious gentleness. This is the gentleness we see revealed as Jesus, the one to whom heaven and earth belong, humbled himself to be born one of us, to die on the cross, and to show mercy to his enemies. And in that, Jesus defeated the powers that held the world in darkness and sin and now, we his people, are called to live that victory out amongst ourselves as witnesses to Jesus’ victory and the inauguration of God’s kingdom. This is our Advent stewardship.

So consider, Brothers and Sisters, when we demand our rights, when we grasp for power, when we nurse grudges, we undermine our gospel witness—we put on display the very darkness from which we’ve been delivered by the one who is light. In contrast Paul calls us to rejoice in the Lord and to manifest Jesus-like gentleness in our relationships. Jesus’ gracious gentleness has forgiven and restored us and that same gracious gentleness ought to shine through us and through the life of the church. Consider that every time we hold a grudge, allow a relationship to break down, or follow the world’s advice to cut those problem or negative people out of our lives, we undermine the Church’s witness to the world. But that’s not all. Paul goes on:

The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything. Rather in everything let your requests be made known to God, by prayer, supplication, and with thanksgiving.

There’s our Advent theme again: Jesus has given us a job to do. He’s given us a gospel treasure to steward in his absence. In the meantime, rather than being anxious—and anxiousness is so often the thing that evil uses to manipulate us—instead of being anxious we should take our needs to God. Jesus made the same point in the Sermon on the Mount. The pagans worry about what they’ll eat, what they’ll wear, and where they’ll sleep. God’s people should know better than to worry unduly about these things. The God who fed

Israel with manna in the wilderness will provide. He is faithful to his promises. The story of his dealings with Israel is the proof and even more so, so is his gift of Jesus, who died and rose again to set us free from sin and death. So go to the Lord with your needs and ask. And while you're at it, give thanks, because you know his faithfulness and his love.

This is part of the witness of the people of God—it's how we are light in the darkness—and it ties back into rejoicing. When Paul talks about rejoicing, at least part of what he's got in mind is a public display or a public witness. The pagan Greeks in Philippi regularly held public celebrations to honour their gods. And yet the pagans, as Jesus said, were always anxious. Because their gods never delivered. Pagan religion was a non-stop game of trial and error, trying to guess what the gods wanted, trying to guess what you may have done wrong to offend them, and then guessing at what you might offer to appease their anger or to ingratiate them to you in order to get what you needed or wanted. The pagan gods were silent and they were notoriously capricious and unreliable. And in this context Paul exhorts the Philippian Christians: Rejoice yourselves. Let the pagans see you celebrating the fact that the Creator of the universe has, through Jesus, made you his own and lives in your midst by his own Holy Spirit. Let the pagans, who know only mean and capricious gods and who live in a dog-eat-dog world, let them see the gracious gentleness of God in you. Live in such a way that they see in you the God who humbles himself to die for the sake of his enemies. And let the pagans see you living in faith, praying in confident thankfulness to the God whose story reveals an unflinching pattern of promise and fulfilment. Shine the light of Jesus into the darkness of the world. And if you'll do that, he says in verse 7:

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in King Jesus.

I think we tend to look at Paul's exhortation here as something we should

do *in order to* experience the peace of God ourselves, but given the context in Philippians, I think Paul's point is actually more about our witness. If we truly live as stewards of the good news about Jesus, if we truly live as people who know the faithfulness of God revealed in Jesus and particularly in his death and resurrection, if we truly know the life of the Spirit, the peace of God—instead of the strife and anxiety of the world—will guard our hearts and minds in a way that will astound the unbelievers around us.

I like to say that Jesus calls us—his church—to be a pocket of new creation in the middle of the old—to be heaven-on-earth people, living Gods' future in the *hic et nunc*, in the here and now. Brothers and Sisters, this is how we do that. And this makes us the John the Baptists of our own place and age as we proclaim the good news about Jesus—how we proclaim and show the world that Jesus has triumphed over the principalities and powers just as he has over sin and death. And as the world took notice of those tiny and seemingly insignificant Christian communities popping up around the Roman empire, so it will take note of us. And some will give glory to God as they see his faithfulness, they will come in faith to Jesus and his cross. But it will also threaten those who are invested in the present age, its pagan gods and sinful systems. And they will fight back.

So we need to ask: Does the world see our joy? Are we the voice crying in the wilderness? Are we the royal heralds the Lord has called us to be, summoning the world away from sin and self and to come to the Lord Jesus, calling the world away from sin and self and to come to the cross? And we need to ask how the world is responding to us. If we're faithfully proclaiming the good news about Jesus, if we're faithfully calling people to repent and to believe, if we're faithfully proclaiming that Jesus is Lord and that his kingdom has come—well—people will respond in one of two ways. Either they'll believe or they'll get angry—as Herod got angry with John. There's some of both out there in the world, but overwhelmingly,

when I look at how people respond to or think of the church these days in our part of the world, it's often just indifference. Why?

Because we have not been the witnesses God calls us to be. We are afraid to confront the world with the good news about Jesus and we are half-hearted in our allegiance to his kingdom. Like old Israel, we pray to God, but we've failed to tear down the old altars to Baal and Asherah—or money, sex, and power. We name Jesus, but we deal dishonestly in business, we sell our souls to the commercialism that surrounds us, we look to politics or to science as our saviours, and we dabble in the sexual immorality of the age. We've failed to proclaim the gospel and we justify it, saying that we'll preach it with our lives. But if we stop to ask what the world sees in our lives, is it really very different? Does the world see us rejoicing in the Lord? Does the world see us manifesting the gracious gentleness of Jesus? Does the world see us living in faithful prayer and trusting in God, or does it see people just as anxious as everyone else? Does it see enmity and strife and broken relationships or does it see a gospel people living out the healing and reconciling love of Jesus in loving unity? Does the world see the peace of God ruling our hearts and minds? Does the world see us, holding high the gospel, as a challenge to its gods and its kings and its sins? It should. But sadly, I think that for the Western Church at large, the answer is often "no".

And, all too often, when we do proclaim the gospel, we do so without power or authority. Think of John boldly declaring the coming judgement and calling Israel to repentance. It was urgent and powerful. In contrast we tend to hold the gospel out as good *advice*, rather than as the good *news* that it is. Friends, the gospel is the royal summons to come in faith to Jesus, the world's true Lord—the Lord who has come with mercy so that the repentant will escape when he comes one day in judgement. This was the power behind John the Baptist' preaching. But all too often we present the gospel as just

another option on the religious smorgasbord—something you might want to try. See if you like it. See if it works for you. If not...oh well.

Brothers and Sisters, that's not the gospel. The gospel is life! The gospel is good news to the people living in the midst of darkness and death: the king who will set the world to rights has come. And that means the gospel, when preached as it should be, will challenge and upset the Herods and Caesars of our age and all those invested in the false gods of the world.

The Advent message is to be prepared. Jesus has given us a gospel mission to take the good news of his death, his resurrection, and his lordship into the world. Brothers and Sisters, pray that we will be faithful to our mission—faithful enough to provoke opposition, because that's the kind of faithfulness that also reaps a harvest for the kingdom. Pray for the holy boldness of John the Baptist and the gracious gentleness of Jesus. Pray that we will be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Pray that the joy of the Lord will overcome us. Brothers and Sisters, Rejoice! Rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I say rejoice.

Let's pray: O Lord, come among us, we pray, with your power and strengthen us with your great might; that whereas, through our sins and wickedness we are grievously hindered in running the race that is set before us, your bountiful grace and mercy may speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, to whom with you and the Holy Spirit, be honour and glory, now and for ever. *Amen.*