

Advent 3

I take as my text today from St. Paul's First Letter to the Church in Corinth:

Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts....

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in thy sight O' Lord my Strength and my Redeemer.”

Today's Collect, Epistle, and Gospel each, in its own way, point to the Advent, that is, the expected Second Coming of our Lord. But, it is the Epistle that ties them together.

When writing this letter to the Church at Corinth, Paul was addressing a Church that was in a state of disunity. There were various factions contending for favor among the congregation. Some supported Paul, while others supported one Paul referred to as Apollos, or they supported other missionaries.

Troubled by all this contention within the Church there, Paul issued a stern warning. He advised the Corinthians of the authority that all ministers of Christ bear. He also reminded them not to usurp God's right to judge those ministers, their motives and achievements, for these ministers are stewards of God's mysteries.

When we look at the Collect for today, we see the same thought: ministers as stewards of God's mysteries.

The Collect says they are messengers, just as John the Baptist was a messenger. They are messengers preparing the way for Christ's return.

The Gospel passage for today reinforces this thought. It is the testimony of Jesus to John: John, the messenger, the forerunner of the expected Messiah.

If we look at the “mysteries,” referred to in both the Epistle and Collect, in a broader sense, that is, not as just the sacraments of the Church but also as the revelation of God’s redemptive purposes, then we get a better sense of the expectation that runs through the Collect, Epistle, and Gospel, the Propers, for this Sunday.

As John the Baptist was the messenger preparing the way for God’s redemptive purposes by declaring the Advent of the Messiah, Jesus Christ; the Christian ministry is likened unto John the Baptist, heralding the Second Advent, or Second Coming, of the Messiah.

Paul’s Epistle passage stands in the position of shedding light on both the Collect and the Gospel passage.

In addressing the issues at Corinth, Paul brings to light the relationship of the Christian Ministry to the Church.

He calls the ministers “stewards.” Specifically, Paul thinks of the ministry as a stewardship of the secrets that God desires to reveal to the people. Thus, as stewards, they bear a heavy responsibility in meeting the expectations of their office.

Paul warns that it is God who will judge them. For the Corinthians to pass judgment on the ministers of Christ is to usurp God’s right to judge. They do not know what is in the heart, only God does.

Now, we must not misinterpret what Paul is saying. It does not mean the Christian Church should fall short of holding its ministers accountable for their actions and failures in executing their responsibilities. The ministers of Christ must uphold the standards that God has set forth for them.

But, St. Paul is concerned with something more than just holding the ministers of the Church to the standards set for them. He is concerned with the whole concept of judgment. Judgment not only of ministers, but also of each other.

We tend to pass judgment on each other rather freely. We judge people on many levels and based upon a broad range of criteria.

Our friendships and relationships rely very much on how we judge others; how they meet our criteria to be friends, to be more than friends, and to be trusted with our love and respect. That is well and good.

But there is another judgment that is beyond us, beyond our capabilities as human beings. It is judging what is in a person's heart; judging what their inner motives are. Of this, we are often guilty. It is the harsh judgment that kills the soul and extinguishes the spiritual life of an individual.

We can choose our friends, our companions, our spouses, relying on our limited ability to discern their character. But we cannot discern what is in their hearts; we cannot know their innermost feelings. We cannot know their motives for what they do or how they act.

Only God can know these things; only He can see within our hearts, beyond the secret places of our inner being.

All will be revealed at the final judgment, not by man, but by God, when Jesus Christ returns at the Second Advent. Our judge will be our Saviour, who has experienced our nature, and who died out of love for His creation.

Now, St. Paul does not let the ministers of the Church get off lightly. Indeed, he presses upon them that they are servants of Christ, and that they are stewards of God's redemptive purposes.

The word that Paul uses, *huperetes*, has been translated as "ministers," but actually means "servants." The ministers of the Church are "servants of Christ." The word itself, *huperetes*, originally meant the rower on the lower bank of a *tireme*. The rower was a slave who took orders from the pilot.

And the word that Paul uses for "steward" is *oikonomos*, meaning *major domo*, the person in charge of the administration of the household of his master. This was a position of authority and great responsibility. The position required a person who was reliable and trustworthy, but still a slave.

So, we have from St. Paul, a very good description of the role of the Christian ministry and the expectation of its ministers.

The Propers on this Sunday are so appropriate, as they are close to the Fall Ember Days. Ember Days occur with the four seasons of the Church, and their theme is the ministry of the Church.

The 1928 Book of Common Prayer reflects the expectation of the ministry in the charge given by the bishop to those who are to be ordained as Priests. It is found beginning on page 539.

It's a rather long charge but the theme of St. Paul runs through it as in:

....we exhort you, in the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye have in remembrance, into how high a Dignity, and to how weighty an Office and Charge ye are called: that is to say, to be Messengers, Watchmen, and Stewards of the Lord; to teach, and to premonish, to feed and provide for the Lord's family; to seek for Christ's sheep that are dispensed abroad, and for his children who are in the midst of this naughty world, that they may be saved through Christ forever.

You may, sometime, read the charge in its entirety but there are two more quotes from it that I would like to share.

Knowing that God so loved us that He sent His only Son to die for us, there is this charge from the bishop:

Have always therefore printed in your remembrance, how great a treasure is committed to your charge. For they are the sheep of Christ, which he bought with his death, and for whom he shed his blood.

Just how weighty a responsibility is reflected in this passage:

The Church and Congregation whom you must serve, is his Spouse, and his Body. And if it shall happen that the same Church, or any Member thereof, shall take any hurt or hindrance by reason of your negligence, ye know the greatness of the fault, and also the horrible punishment that will ensue.

For a certainty, in his admonishment to the Church at Corinth, Paul also included a wakeup warning to the ministers themselves for all time.

The warning calls to mind the theme of our Advent Season: the Second Coming of Christ. It is at that time that the final judgment will be passed on each of us and the Ministers of Christ will be held accountable for their stewardship of God's redemptive purpose.

The expectation of a final judgment is tempered by the beauty of God's redemption revealed in the Gospel, the good news of Christ. While our expectation of what is to come may be frightening now, we are called to remember that it is through love that this judgment will be passed.

Jesus Christ came into the world in an act of Divine Love. He taught us the power of love. He gave us access to that love through the Church which is His Body. And we are nourished by the Heavenly Banquet He has provided for us through His Sacrifice of Love on the Cross, and manifested through His Presence in the bread and wine offered in thanksgiving during the Holy Eucharist.

And, not lastly, each of us share in being messengers of Christ to the world. Truly, as Christians, it becomes our individual, as well as our corporate, responsibility to share in the stewardship of God's Love and his Promise of eternal life through Jesus Christ.