

Advent 3

I take as my text today from the 11th Chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel:

....Go and shew John again those things which ye do hear and see...

“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.”

As we continue on the theme of the Second Coming, today's Collect, Epistle, and Gospel each, in their own way, point to the Advent, that expected Second Coming of our Lord but it is the Epistle that ties them together on this Third Sunday in Advent.

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 Apollos, or 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. These ministers are stewards of God's mysteries.

When we look at the Collect for today, we see the same thought: the 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 also reinforces this thought. It is the testimony of Jesus to John: John, the messenger, the forerunner of the expected Messiah.

As we go hurriedly about our lives in preparation for the celebration of the Birth of our Saviour, we may, indeed, be a little like John the Baptist, who sat in prison waiting for something spectacular to happen: we may be getting impatient.

We get impatient because Christmas seems so far away; then, suddenly, it is upon us and, in a rush, it is over again, leaving us somewhat dismayed, our expectations seemingly unfulfilled,

If we are caught up in celebrating only the past, that is, the birth, of our Saviour, His First Coming, then, most assuredly we will be left unfulfilled, for now our attention should also be on the future as promised to us. That future is the Second Coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, when He shall return to judge, as we say in the Creed, the "quick and the dead."

The joy that we will celebrate at Christmas should not diminish in the days and months that follow; rather, there should be an increasing joyful expectation of the completion of God's purpose in sending his Son into the world to be our Saviour, our Messiah; the joyful expectation, not the dreadful, but the joyful expectation of that day when we will be judged by our Saviour and given our portion as joint heirs to the Kingdom of Heaven.

We Christians are so much like John the Baptist in that, as the impatient human beings that we are, we fail to see clearly that Jesus Christ as the Messiah is more than we could ever imagine; He is a different kind of Messiah.

St. Matthew, in today's Gospel passage, helps us to focus on Jesus as that different kind of Messiah.

What do we mean by that? Simply, Jesus represents a total departure from the Old Testament expectation.

Here, in St. Matthew's Gospel, we can see John as the bridge between the Old Testament expectation of the Messiah, and the reality of the New Covenant revealed through Jesus Christ and sealed in His Blood.

Though John most assuredly was aware that he was to prepare the way for the Messiah, we are able to discern the tension that might be developing in his disciples, for they, like their master, were expecting something very much different from what they were seeing in Jesus.

Adding to that tension was the manner in which Jesus and His disciples lived daily, especially the fact that they did not fast, as did John and his disciples, who led quite an austere lifestyle; moreover, there was just something about His demeanor and sense of purpose.

Jesus was indeed different, and the lowly estate of His background was not without notice among the Jews, who were offended at His parentage, His lack of formal education, and His general upbringing. He was being judged on outward appearances, as Jesus addressed in these words:

And blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me.

Jesus was being judged by externals, while those who judged were oblivious to what treasures might be found in a plain box, while, on the other hand, less may be revealed when a beautifully wrapped package is opened.

Quite to the point in the Gospel passage here is that it presents a contrast between the expectation of a Messiah of might and vengeance, as envisioned by John the Baptist, and that of a Messiah of Love, as was the reality of Jesus Christ.

Based on the prophets of old, and as preached by John the Baptist, the vision of the Messiah was an earthly king who would liberate Israel from its earthly conditions.

But, that was not the kind of Messiah that God had planned. Jesus represented something very much different from what the Jewish nation expected, and, more significantly, what they could accept as Messiah.

Tragically, the expectation of the Jewish people at that time could not be met by Jesus Christ. He just wasn't their kind of Messiah. He was not going to ride at the head of a mighty army to drive the Romans from the land of Israel. He was not going to establish an earthly kingship, and rule from an earthly throne.

Certainly, He could be, and had the power and authority to be, the mighty deliverer of Israel from Roman bondage, a powerful earthly king.

That power and more was being revealed through His Ministry, in His own words:

...the blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them.

Here, in answer to John's question, Jesus offered proof of His Messiahship.

It wasn't a matter of John's faith failing him that he sent his disciples to question Jesus; perhaps, it was more out of impatience, as he sat in prison, that John asked, and Jesus offered proof that He was the Messiah.

It is as if Jesus was saying to John: Yes, I am the Messiah, but not as you have imagined or expected. That is what Jesus was telling John's disciples, the message He told them to deliver to John in prison. What was it that separated John in his expectation of the Messiah from the reality of Jesus as the true Messiah? Simply, it was the Cross.

Before the Cross, there was one expectation of the Messiah; after the Cross, there was another.

Because he could not see the Cross, John only grasped half the truth; his gospel was that of divine holiness with divine destruction. The true gospel of Jesus Christ was that of divine holiness with divine love.

With John came the dawn of the New Covenant; but, alas, he was not to witness that moment on the Cross, when Jesus redeemed humankind by paying the price of our redemption.

The debt that we had run up for our transgressions was infinite, something we could of ourselves never pay. But Jesus Christ, who had taken on our nature, and lived a perfect and undefiled life, could offer to make satisfaction for us to God.

As our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ paid the debt owed to God, but that did not mean that there were no consequences for our sins. We still would be judged accordingly; yet, without Jesus Christ being the Satisfaction for the sins of the whole of creation, we could not approach a final judgment in which we would be given our final disposition, and our eternal lot meted out.

From the very beginning, it was God's desire that provision be made for His creation to be re-united to Him. That provision was fulfilled in His Son. And clearly, all that Jesus did in His earthly ministry was an expression of God's love for us, fulfilled on the Cross, when our sins were nailed with our Saviour to the wood.

From the dawn of creation, there has been an expectation, a waiting for something great and wonderful. Through God's Chosen People, the process of fulfillment began, the preparation being made, not just for the first Advent, but also for the second and final Advent.

Then, in a moment of time, through a joyous and profound event, God entered the world in the Person of Jesus Christ, and embraced His creation. He poured forth His love, as He took upon Himself the burden of our sins in the perfect union of God and man. In taking human nature upon Himself, He was able to experience all that we as human beings experience, all the emotions and feelings, both physical and spiritual.

In this perfect uniting of the Divine and the human, Jesus Christ was able to accomplish what we could never in all of eternity do: He was able to make satisfaction for our sins, the sins of the whole world so that we may, in the final Judgment, stand before Him and receive our due.

One of the theologians of the 11th century, St. Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury, gave much thought to the whole concept of the Atonement, and how our infinite debt to God could be satisfied, and, though his philosophy would not be accepted entirely, he offered much in the way of understanding the redemptive process. One thing he did leave us was this prayer, most appropriate for Advent:

My God, I pray that I may so know you and love you that I may rejoice in you. And if I may not do so fully in this life let me go steadily onto the day when I come to that fullness ...Let me receive That which you promised through your truth, that my joy may be full.

Our life as a Christian is a journey with a purpose, with a goal, and it is not without its obstacles, its difficulties and diversions. And though it may not always be the straight path we would hope for, nonetheless, if we always keep before us and in us the Lord Jesus Christ, we will ultimately reach that goal.

Engulfed in the joy and wonder of the First Coming, when God sent His Son to deliver us from the bondage of sin, we can have a joyful, though solemn, expectation of the Second Coming of our Lord, knowing that the satisfaction for our sins has been made, the infinite debt has been paid; and knowing that we will be judged fairly and lovingly when we finally stand before Him.