

Sermon Advent 3 Year B 2023

During this holy season of Advent, holy Mother Church - through the prayers, readings and hymns she gives us at this time - *prepares us* for the coming feast of Christmas. While a great many people act as if Christmas is here already, (and have been in full-on celebration mode for several weeks now!), so great and wondrous is the mystery we celebrate, that we don't want it to come upon us as a surprise and find us ill-prepared. Now we might ask ourselves why Advent? *Why* this time of waiting and expectation and preparation? Why a special season to help us 'get ready' for Christmas? It's certainly not in the bible. We will find no command from Our Lord or the apostles telling us it is necessary. The earliest evidence we have for this season of Advent comes from about the fifth century. So, even if early, it is certainly not apostolic.

But this is where the catholic instinct kicks in. So great is the mystery we celebrate at Christmas that we need time to prepare for it. The centuries of lived Christian experience (even by the fifth century) were showing it would be *to our advantage* – that is, for our good – that we make space in our hearts and minds so we can better comprehend something of the mystery we recall at this time. We make a grave error in dismissing the traditions, practices, rites and rituals of the church simply as unnecessary, man-made burdens. The Protestant Reformers made a grave error when they said only those things explicitly permitted in Scripture would be permitted in the life of the church. The Anglican position was far more sensible and reflected the long wisdom of the church: only those things explicitly *prohibited* by Scripture ought to be prohibited in the life of the church. Practices could be retained if they were for our good. In short, we keep and observe Advent because *it is* for our good. Advent is for our good because *it trains* our hearts and minds to look for Christ, to wait for Christ.

What is not often understood is that during this season of Advent we echo the long centuries of waiting and hopeful expectation before Christ came. During these four short weeks, we live in condensed form – in distilled form – something of those long, silent centuries punctuated by the prophets. The prophets who by straining forward, and looking ahead perceived in shadowy form what would be fulfilled in Christ. This straining forward and looking ahead to God's definitive action in the world was such a mark of the Old Testament prophet. But of course, it is the feature of the true Christian as well. We too strain forward. We too look ahead. We too look beyond our context to God's final action in the world when Christ comes again in glory.

This is precisely what Advent is training us to do. And this is why the great, (indeed the greatest) prophet of the Old Testament – Isaiah – is such a compelling voice at this time. Indeed, he is sometimes called the Prophet of the Advent. And why tonight (when you all return for our service of Nine Lessons and Carols!) the voice of the prophets again will feature so prominently. Christ didn't just appear. He came at the end of a long period of waiting and hopeful expectation. A hope given voice by the prophets.

And this tradition of waiting upon God, this tradition of hopeful expectation, is also why the strange, unsettling (but also compelling) figure of John the Baptist looms so large during Advent. Here we are just one week out from Christmas, and still no mention of Angels or Mary and Joseph! Just one week out, and no mention of Nazareth or Bethlehem or dangerous journeys. Instead, we are still on the banks of the Jordan River in the company of the Baptist.

As we know, this strange and disarming figure of John the Baptist is understood as one who 'prepares the way.' Indeed, this is how he perceives his own ministry, his own life and work. *So John said, "I am, as Isaiah prophesied, 'a voice that cries in the wilderness, Make a straight way for the Lord.'" In other words, John does not exist for himself. His message and ministry is not for himself. His life and ministry and message is only directed to Another. And that Other of course is Christ. As in that long line of prophets before him, John points to something (indeed, Someone) beyond him. As he says, the one coming after me, and I am not fit to undo his sandal strap. This stance of humility simply repeats what the evangelist John says at the outset of our reading today: There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.*

He was not the light, but came to testify to the light. This is perhaps one of the great tests of the authentic messengers of God. Do they draw attention to themselves? Or do they direct us to Christ? And does this not reveal something of the great disorder of our age? The disorder in which every person is in the spotlight. Every person is meant to be a brilliant shining light, or at least have the potential to become a brilliant shining light. A generation (really a couple of generations, now) who consider their entire worth by how they are perceived by others. We now live in a world where every voice and opinion is supposed to be valued and appreciated. When in fact most voices and opinions are silly, uninteresting, and ill-informed!

Yet it is precisely these silly, uninteresting, and uninformed voices – all these bright shining lights – that are amplified across the globe. Yet we know the damage of this. We know the damage that exaggerated, disordered introspection - this calling of attention to ourselves – can do! Yes, there needs to be a *properly ordered* love of self. And yes, we need to respect others.

Yet these can easily become unbalanced. Self-appreciation and self-affirmation can slip into egocentrism, self-centeredness, arrogance and even aggressive self-assertion. And despite the overwhelming space given over this mode of living, it only leads to sadness, pain and misery. Not only for ourselves but also for those who have to live with us! When the biggest thing in this world is the self, there is no surer guarantee of misery. Preoccupation with one's own image and the never-ending pursuit of recognition will only lead us into a new form of slavery, with our ego as tyrant over us.

John the Baptist, and the prophets, however, point us to a radical alternative. The lives of all the saints point us in the same way. Life, truth and fulfillment *does not* come from within. Despite the insistence of our age, our deepest truth comes from outside of ourselves. And this Truth is *given* us by God and revealed most perfectly in his Son Jesus. And it is that is at the very heart of the great Mystery we celebrate at this time. Look to ourselves - only look inward - then we will only find frustration, disappointment and deception.

But as people of faith, we ought keep before us the spirit of the saints and prophets, and of John the Baptist who urge us to look ahead, to look out and past ourselves. Later in John's Gospel, the Baptist says, *I must decrease, and he must increase*. John effectively says, as we all must, *Not me but He. Not my way, but his way. Not my voice, but his voice. Not my light but his light*. Amen.