

THE SUNDAY OF THE YEAR
A Sermon for the Third Sunday of Advent, 2012
On the Text: Propers for the Day
By the Reverend Doctor Randolph Constantine

In a few of my sermons, I have looked at how the church year recapitulates the life of Jesus, compressing it first into about 5 and ½ months or less from His Birth until His Ascension, while not being uniform about how the time is being compressed during those few months. But Advent is outside the time from Jesus Birth until His Ascension; so, in that scheme of things, what is Advent for? It is certainly not for celebrating or commemorating the time between the Conception of Jesus and His Birth. In fact, His Conception is never directly celebrated. In that regard, we merely celebrate the day on which the angel, Gabriel, announced to Mary, that she would give birth to Jesus. We celebrate that event, the Annunciation, on March 25th.

Mary's pregnancy is mentioned only in three places in the Bible: 1) In Matthew 1:18-25, where we are told of Joseph's concerns and thoughts of divorcing her. 2) In Luke 1:39-56, that tell us of her visit to Elizabeth, who is pregnant with John the Baptist, in which Mary sings the "Magnificat, 'My soul doth magnify the Lord,..." and 3) In Luke 2:1-6, which tell us of the reason for Joseph and Mary's trip to Bethlehem and the Birth of Jesus. But that's it, ... because it is incidental the real story, the story of Jesus' Birth. It would seem that Mary's pregnancy ought to be a main part of Advent, but it's not. It is more a good question as to why Mary's Pregnancy is not even mentioned during Advent, than why it is not emphasized. I cannot give you an answer other than by telling you what *is* emphasized.

The English priest, Melville Scott, in his book on the Propers looks at Advent as a season of Preparation. In his view, the Sundays, or perhaps the weeks, of Advent are characterized by different sorts of preparation. The first Sunday shows us the Duty of Preparation; the Second shows us Preparation by the Word; the Third Sunday, today, shows us Preparation by the

Church; while the fourth Sunday, shows us Preparation by Christ! Yes, even Christ Himself prepared for his own ministry by being baptized by John, and as a member of the Trinity, was a part of sending John to prepare the way for Him.

Maybe it would help if we knew what it is we are preparing for? The French theologian and Cardinal, Jean Daniélou, wrote:

“We live always during Advent. We are always waiting for the Messiah to come. The Messiah has come, but is not yet fully manifest. The Messiah is not fully manifest in each of our souls, not fully manifest in humankind as a whole: that is to say, that just as Christ was born according to the flesh in Bethlehem of Judah, so must He be born to the spirit in each of our souls.”

Yes, we know He has already come. We can try to prepare for the celebration of that First Coming, but to truly prepare our hearts for that celebration should really take all year. I am not talking about getting a tree and decorating our houses and doing all the other things of this season that are in fact distractions from what we need to do. I am talking about preparing our hearts to comprehend the magnitude of what that humble birth 2000 years ago truly means for all mankind. Even so, we try to celebrate the anniversary of that Birth with reverence and joy. There are those other Advents for which we need preparation: that Advent when we take Christ into our hearts, or perhaps that is something that will happen of its own accord; no, it will be of Christ's accord, when we are well and properly prepared for Him to come to us. And it must be that way because as Austin Farrar said: “We cannot come to God, He is beyond our reach; but He can come to us, for we are not beneath His mercy.”

So what is it we are preparing for? That should be obvious now; we should see that first and foremost, we are preparing for Jesus' Second Coming. If we do that and do it fully and properly, the preparation for the other two Advents, for the celebration of Christmas and for making our

hearts ready for Christ, will come from preparing for His Second Coming. Our very eternal lives depend on our being ready for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ; it is that important. Reverend Scott has it exactly right: Advent is a season of Preparation, preparation for that heart-stopping moment when after His Second Coming, we must stand before Jesus and have our lives and all our thoughts examined. With that prospect in view, is it any wonder that both John the Baptist and Jesus preached, **“Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.”**

If today and the rest of this week are a time of Preparation for the Church, let’s see how the Propers explain that. In the Collect, we pray that: **O Christ, who at Thy first coming didst send Thy messenger to prepare the way before Thee; Grant that Thy ministers and stewards of thy mysteries may likewise so prepare and make ready Thy way, by turning the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, that at Thy Second Coming to judge the world, we may be found an acceptable people in Thy sight.** It is the church’s duty through her ministers and stewards to prepare her people to be acceptable in Christ’s sight.

This is an echo of what St. Paul says in the Epistle lesson. This lesson is only 5 verses long, verses 1-5 of chapter 4 of 1 Corinthians. First, in verses 1 and 2 he says: **1 Corinthians 4:1-2 Let a man so account of us, as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God. 2 Moreover it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful.** Now, the context of this is that St. Paul has been talking about the himself and the leaders of the church at Corinth in chapter 3. He is talking about ministers, but he is also talking about everyone in the congregation when, after an aside about judging himself, he says in the last one and a half verses: **1 Corinthians 4:4b-5 but he that judgeth me is the Lord. 5 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: and then shall every man have praise of God.** What he is saying boils

down to, “Don’t judge anything until the Lord comes, which means until Jesus comes which will be His Second Coming. Then what he is saying in those latter verses is what I cribbed from him: at the Last Judgment, Jesus will bring to light all the secret things we did and thought. This is an obvious warning to everyone.

There is another thing here that we tend to overlook, is the connection of this passage to what God had told Moses he must say to the people, the children of Israel: Exodus 19:6 **6 And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation. These are the words which thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel.** This was confirmed by St. Peter in 1 Peter 2:9-10 in a statement in which we, the Gentiles, are now included **9 But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light: 10 Which in time past were not a people, but are now the people of God: which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy.** This connection tells me that even if you are not an ordained minister, you also have a responsibility to help in preparing your fellow Christians, members of this congregation or not, for Christ’s inevitable Second coming.

Our Gospel lesson might not seem to be very closely related to this idea of preparing oneself and others for Jesus’ Second Coming, but it is. John, who is imprisoned by Herod out east of the Dead Sea sent two of his disciples to see if Jesus really is the Messiah. This is almost unbelievable that John who had baptized Jesus and had seen the Holy Spirit descend and heard God speak from on high in Luke 3:22 **22 And the Holy Ghost descended in a bodily shape like a dove upon him, and a voice came from heaven, which said, Thou art my beloved Son; in thee I am well pleased.** But from prison, John cannot see that this person is really the same Jesus He baptized so he sends people to see and inquire. Jesus’ answer is short: he tells them and he

shows them: Matthew 11:4-6 **4 Jesus answered and said unto them, Go and shew John again those things which ye do hear and see: 5 The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them. 6 And blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me.** What Jesus is saying here is that He is doing the work the Father wanted Him to do, the work of the Church, the work of preparing people for the passing away of the Law with the coming of the New Covenant, of preparing them for when He will come again.

In the verses after this, Jesus has nothing but good to say about John. He affirms that John is the one about whom it was prophesied in Malachi 3:1: Matthew 11:10 **10 For this is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee.** Two verses after the end of our lesson, Jesus affirms that John is the Elijah who was to come, prophesied in Mal 4. In saying these things, Jesus is somewhat subtly affirming that he, Jesus, is the one about whom John, the messenger prophesied, that is, that Jesus is the Messiah.

The Psalms and OT lesson chosen for today are the standard ones, Psalm 85 is a paean to peace and righteousness. It could have been written not long after the Israelites had returned from their 70 years in Babylon, or it could simply be a Psalm of prophecy of how it will be when the Messiah comes. Psalm 107 is a psalm describing many perils and dangers God's people may fall victim to, but it is the Lord, and the Lord only who redeems them and saves them. The OT lesson in Isaiah 35 is a prophecy of God's highway, the straight highway in the desert, on which nothing violent or evil shall be able to walk on or to cross. Isaiah and those who came after him could not see or were not told that some of their prophecies would not come true until after the Messiah had come, been killed and risen from the dead and then left (ascended into heaven) and then came again. I see this as a prophecy of how things will be after that Second Coming, of this

highway being the way to the gates of New Jerusalem as described in Revelation 21:25-27 25 and its gates will never be shut by day- and there will be no night there. 26 They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. 27 But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.

With this in mind it is easy to see how Isaiah 35 has to do with the Second Coming of Christ and what things will be like after the Judgment.

However, the other possible choices for OT lessons also speak to this. Those choices are varied: Jeremiah 1:4-10 & 17-19, which is God's call to Jeremiah. Amos 7, describes God showing Amos visions of possible end times judgments that could befall Israel. However, the lesson more pertinent than these two is Malachi:3:1-5 & Ch. 4, which we already noted contains the prophecy of the messenger who will prepare the way in chapter 3 and then in Chapter 4 we have the prophecy of the burning of evildoers like stubble, and of the coming of Elijah. Any would be good, but the selections from Isaiah and Malachi are the better ones. Each one carries the same message: Repent and prepare for bad times for those who are evil.

When I began thinking about this sermon, one idea came to me. It was an answer to the question: What relation does Advent bear to the rest of the Christian year? The answer that came was: If the Church year is somehow considered to be a week, then Advent is Sunday. Now Sunday for Christians is our Sabbath. Every Sunday is a little Easter, but it is also supposed to be our day of rest. A little while ago, you heard and prayed along with the reading of the Ten Commandments. You heard the Fourth Commandment and asked God to help you keep that law. I used to think that the word, *sabbath*, meant either the number seven or a seventh. A *Sabbatical* for a professor was something he got to take in the seventh year after six years of teaching, so *sabbath* had to mean seventh, right? Sorry! The Hebrew word for the number 7 is

sheba, just as in the Queen of Sheba. Sorry, but a *sabbath* is a stopping, a rest, an intermission. The Ten Commandments are still in force; the Lord did not do away with that part of the Law the way He did away with the food rules.

My analogy is not perfect. We don't stop doing everything during Advent, but we do try even harder to stop sinning. We realize more strongly that we have to try harder to prepare for Jesus' Second Coming because he has promised that He will come as a thief in the night. We cannot be like the watchman who is asleep, or the foolish virgins who had no oil for their lamps.

Sunday is the first day of the week, and it is now the day we Christians set aside as our Sabbath. Advent is the first season of the Church year. We do not stop in Advent, but if we truly observe Advent, we do slow down and devote ourselves to fasting and prayer, to spiritual preparation. Our two penitential seasons, Advent and Lent, are two of the holier times of the year because of the emphasis on penitence. The first sentence of the Fourth Commandment says: **Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.** Because they have to work on Sunday, most Christian ministers set aside some other day of the week as their Sabbath, usually Monday.

Advent is a meet and right way to start the Christian year in which we prayerfully and penitently prepare, not just for the coming of the Lord, but also for the rest of the year, until the next Advent season rolls around. With the commercialization of Christmas, Advent as Advent is neglected more and more by too many Christians and is looked on by many as only a preparation for Christmas, when it is so much more than that. Try thinking of Advent as the Sunday of the year, as a "day" to be kept holy, a day of spiritual preparation, that is really about 28 days long. Remember Advent as the Sunday of the year, and keep it holy.

AMEN!