

PREPARING GOD'S PEOPLE
A Sermon for the Third Sunday in Advent, 2010-2011
On the Text: Propers for the Day
By the Reverend Doctor Randolph Constantine

This morning I began the service with the ancient Introit from Philippians 4 that begins: Philippians 4:4-6 4 **Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.** This day in Advent, the third Sunday is often called Gaudete, even outside of the Roman Church because Gaudete is the first word of the Introit when it is said in Latin. Gaudete is the day on which we light the pink candle on the Advent Wreath. Why should we rejoice? We are still in Advent, but we are now always more than halfway to Christmas day from the First Sunday in Advent. However, the winter solstice and the shortest and darkest days of the year are always still ahead of us on the Third Sunday in Advent. Why rejoice? Because the light of Christ shines in the darkness of our hearts even in the darkness of the long nights of this Advent season.

Advent is not the season of Christmas shopping; it is a season of penitent preparation for the Advent, the coming, of our Lord Jesus Christ, both for the celebration of the coming which He made at His birth 2000 years ago and of His Second Coming which we anticipate, but which no man knows the hour or the day of when that will happen. Early in this service we prayed both the Collect for today, and the Collect the first Sunday in Advent, which we are required to pray at every service during the Advent season. In each of those Collects, mention is made of both Advents. In the collect for the First Sunday in Advent, we prayed: **Almighty God, give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness and put on us the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life, in which Thy Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; which is an obvious mention of Christmas. That Collect continues with: that in the last day, when He shall come again in glorious majesty to judge both the quick and the dead, .** which should remind us of that day for which we have to prepare. The Collect for today, the Third Sunday in Advent, mentions both Advents. Christmas is mentioned as Christ's first coming at the beginning of the prayer: **O Christ, who at Thy first coming didst send Thy messenger to prepare the way before Thee; But the mention of the Second Coming is described as the time at which it is hoped that the petition of the prayer will be fulfilled. So the rest of the Collect, up to the closing invocation asks this: 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, .**

Now, I don't know whether to say I have a problem with this or not. This is one of the few Collects, if not the only one, that tells me what part of my job is. If it is truly my job to turn "the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just", I may be in big trouble.. I wonder if I should not run in terror into the desert or the mountains and try to hide the way Isaiah describes the Last Day in Isaiah 2:19-21 **19 And people shall enter the caves of the rocks and the holes of the ground, from before the terror of the LORD, and from the splendor of his majesty, when he rises to terrify the earth. 20 In that day mankind will cast away their idols of silver and their**

idols of gold, which they made for themselves to worship, to the moles and to the bats, 21 to enter the caverns of the rocks and the clefts of the cliffs, from before the terror of the LORD, and from the splendor of his majesty, when he rises to terrify the earth.

My problem here is that when we speak of the duty we all had laid on us when Jesus gave the disciples the Great Commission to “**Go ye therefore and teach all nations,...**”, it is always said that it is only our duty to witness to people, to tell them of the Gospel, that it is up to the Holy Spirit to change their hearts. I can preach to you the necessity of treating the Advent season as something other than the season of Christmas Shopping, but I cannot change your hearts if you worship the idols of this world. Only God can open your ears to the message He wants you to hear.

However, if it is my duty to try to prepare you for the Great and Final Advent, and I think it is; then I guess I had better get to work. I know I don't have an easy job because I know that I too am one of those who needs to hear what I have to say. I need to listen to my own sermons and take them to heart. I have to prepare myself as well.

Now, it really wasn't just some Priest or Bishop years ago who wrote that collect telling me what to do. No, it was Jesus and St. Paul, because that Collect for today is just quoting our Epistle lesson in identifying the ministers of Christ and the stewards of the mysteries of God. 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.** All through the Gospels, the Book of Acts, and the Epistles of St. Paul, we are told by Jesus and St. Paul of what is required of ministers and of all disciples of Jesus Christ. When we read all of that we see that preparing God's people for the Second coming of Christ is definitely implied by all of that teaching. The questions that come immediately to mind are, of course, “**What do we need to do to prepare for the Lord's Second Advent? Is there any thing different from that than what any Christian would normally do?**” The answer to that last question is simply, “Not much.” What is different is a matter of emphasis.

Once Jesus began His ministry, He spent the early part of it preaching about the kingdom of God in a way that was not very different from what the Jewish people heard every week in their synagogues until that Sabbath day in Nazareth when St. Luke described it in Luke 4:16-21 that in a Synagogue, Jesus read from Isaiah 61: 1,2, which says: Isaiah 61:1-2 **The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me; because the LORD hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound; 2 To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all that mourn;** and then told them: Luke 4:21 **This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears.**

After that He began healing and casting out demons and preaching repentance. He preached a Gospel of faith and repentance, but His message of humility, love, and forgiveness was not well accepted. His message was not really understood by the disciples until after His Crucifixion, Resurrection, and Ascension, and then, not until the Day of Pentecost, when the

Holy Spirit came down upon the disciples and gave them the knowledge they needed in order to carry out Jesus' orders of spreading the Gospel. Then they understood

It turned out that the spreading of the Gospel to the Gentiles needed the talents of a special man who was a Jew, a Pharisee, and at the same time, a born Roman citizen, a man educated by the great Gamaliel, and who spoke, read and wrote Hebrew, Greek, and Latin. If there was more than one man who met those requirements, there would have been very few of them. That man was Saul of Tarsus, who, after a direct encounter with the Risen and Ascended Jesus, became St. Paul.

It is not often noted, but it could have been that he was chosen for his ministry because of a latent talent he had for writing, for distilling the essence of the Gospel and putting it into words that most anyone could understand. Is it difficult to understand Romans 10:9 9 “... **if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.**” ? St. Paul was the great Communicator of the Apostles, the great expositor of the Gospel. Part of our preparation is to come in faith and read the Gospels, the Acts, and the Epistles, and to have our faith strengthened by regular worship together, as the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews said at Hebrews 10:24-25 24 **And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, 25 not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.**, which is a general instruction to the faithful, with an Advent admonition added on to the end of it.

So that just about covers it, doesn't it? Have faith in Lordship of Jesus that is strong enough that you are willing to, and do, declare it out loud and believe deeply in His Resurrection, so deeply that you are sure you also will be raised from the dead on the Last Day. Try to live as godly a life as possible. Come to church regularly and partake of Holy Communion often. Then there is what Jesus said about recognizing the need to be ready for that Coming as he said in Mark 13:31-37 31 **Heaven and earth shall pass away: but my words shall not pass away. 32 But of that day and that hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels which are in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father. 33 Take ye heed, watch and pray: for ye know not when the time is. 34 For the Son of man is as a man taking a far journey, who left his house, and gave authority to his servants, and to every man his work, and commanded the porter to watch. 35 Watch ye therefore: for ye know not when the master of the house cometh, at even, or at midnight, or at the cockcrowing, or in the morning: 36 Lest coming suddenly he find you sleeping. 37 And what I say unto you I say unto all, Watch.** We must watch and think about that Second Coming all through the year, not just during Advent. because it could happen at any time: 2 minutes from now, sometime next year, or not for another 1000 years. Because we do not know when the Master will come, we must be ready; we must not be asleep in sin. That's about all we need to do to prepare for his Second Coming, right? Not quite.

There is one little thing that I find it hard to preach about. It is a part of the Law God imposed on the Jews which has not passed from the Law; it is the Law of the Tithe. I have always had a hard time talking to people about money, especially about giving to a charity or to the church; but now I feel I must because it now the time of year when we all must consider what

we can give during the next year and make our pledges to the church for that. This is so the church can make a budget and try to operate within it.

The law of the tithe first appears in Leviticus 27:30-33. It is later spelled out in more detail in Numbers 18: 21-26 and in Deuteronomy 14:22-28, where it is explained that a tithe of produce can be converted into money if transporting a tithe of Produce is not practical. For those whose business does not produce grain or cattle, tithing of money is simple. Tithing is simple; just give 10% of what you make, off the top, to the church.

You may say, that's impossible, nobody could do that. I assure you it is not impossible. As a minister of this church, I feel it is imperative that I tithe, and I do. At the beginning of each year, we, Penny and I, set a weekly amount to give in the hope that it will be enough for a tenth of our gross for the coming year. If it turns out that we have given more than 10% of our gross, so be it. If in January we find out that we have not given enough in the past year, we make an extra contribution as an adjustment. The thing that people don't understand is that 10% is not an amount some human decided on; it is God's amount, and it is the minimum. Giving more than 10% as alms for the poor and for other causes is called Sacrificial Giving. That is a sacrifice; the tithe is not a sacrifice; it is a necessity to support the church. I can't afford **not** to tithe.

The law of the Tithe may be given in Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, but there are examples of giving a tenth way back in Genesis. After Abram (before God renamed him Abraham) defeated Chedorlaomer, Abram is described as meeting with Melchizedek in Genesis 14:18-20 **18 And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. (He was priest of God Most High.) 19 And he blessed him and said, "Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Possessor(1)of heaven and earth; 20 and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand!" And Abram gave him a tenth of everything.** After Jacob had the dream of the ladder and God had spoken to him in the dream, Jacob set up a pillar and made a vow to God as described in Genesis 28:18-22 **18 So early in the morning Jacob took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. 19 He called the name of that place Bethel,(1)but the name of the city was Luz at the first. 20 Then Jacob made a vow, saying, "If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, 21 so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God, 22 and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house. And of all that you give me I will give a full tenth to you."**

In First Chronicles, when King David presented all that he had collected for the building of the Temple, a great treasure of gold, silver, bronze, and iron as well as other things, he praised God and showed that he understood who was the source of all that wealth. In doing so, he gave us the words we use when we present the offering on the altar. In 1 Chronicles 29:10-14, we read: **Blessed be thou, LORD God of Israel our father, for ever and ever. 11 Thine, O LORD, is the greatness, and the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty: for all that is in the heaven and in the earth is thine; thine is the kingdom, O LORD, and thou art exalted as head above all. 12 Both riches and honour come of thee, and thou reignest over all; and in thine hand is power and might; and in thine hand it is to make great, and to give strength unto all. 13 Now**

therefore, our God, we thank thee, and praise thy glorious name. 14 But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able to offer so willingly after this sort? for all things come of thee, [O LORD] and of thine own have we given thee.

In the next to last chapter of the Old Testament, God speaking through Malachi says the Jews are robbing him: Malachi 3:6-10 6 For I am the LORD, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed. 7 Even from the days of your fathers ye are gone away from mine ordinances, and have not kept them. Return unto me, and I will return unto you, saith the LORD of hosts. But ye said, Wherein shall we return? 8 Will a man rob God? Yet ye have robbed me. But ye say, Wherein have we robbed thee? In tithes and offerings. 9 Ye are cursed with a curse: for ye have robbed me, even this whole nation. 10 Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the LORD of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it.

So now you can see all that is needed to be prepared for Christ's Second Advent are for us to: have a strong and active faith that keeps us involved in the life of the church, pray without ceasing, in all things give thanks, receive the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper regularly, regularly study the Holy Scriptures, recognize that we need to be ready at all times for that Second Coming, and support of the church with your tithes and offerings. If we do that, I think we may satisfy that petition of today's Collect, **that we may be found an acceptable people in Thy sight,**

There are only two models of giving in the Bible: the Tithe and the model in Acts 4 in which one sells everything and gives the proceeds to the church, expecting then to be supported by the church. The church of today is not prepared to act on that model. Tithing will suffice.

In the Lord's Prayer, we pray, "Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." God's will will not be done completely on earth until Jesus comes again and the earth is cleansed. It is that day for which we must be prepared. In the next to last verse of the Book of Revelation, Jesus says Revelation 22:20 **Surely I come quickly. Amen.** St. John, as His amanuensis, replies: Revelation 22:20 **Even so, come, Lord Jesus.** ... Yes, Lord Jesus, Come quickly!

AMEN.