

Advent 4

I take as my text today, from the first chapter of St. John's Gospel:

I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Esaias.

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 bring the season of Advent to a close, our focus now turns to that first Christmas, the **First Coming of our Lord**, that we celebrate each year with joy: joy that God entered into the world, taking upon himself our flesh, and living among us in the form of a man, in order to redeem us from Satan, sin, and certain death.

As we look around at the world today, we quickly come to the realization that we are caught in what we might call a continuing process as we await the Second Coming. The expectation of the **First Coming** in the sense of a messiah to establish an earthly kingdom was not fulfilled; and, for the early Christian, the expectation of the immanent return of Christ, that is his **Second Coming**, also was unfulfilled. Instead, the Christian was left to face a hostile world with a mandate to change it.

The same hostile world exists today where Christianity is either shunned or ignored, Christians persecuted, and many Christians executed for their faith in the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

Where Christianity is generally accepted, Orthodox Christians, such as we Anglicans, pretty much resemble John the Baptist as the ***voice of one crying in the wilderness***. To further complicate matters, our witness to Jesus Christ seems to get lost in the hustle and bustle of a rapidly changing world where material concerns tend to overshadow spiritual concerns. We are in a world that is more and more becoming a wilderness for Christian witness.

Right now, in the chaos caused by the coronavirus, when Christians should be actively seeking God and looking to the Church as a place of refuge, the opposite is more the reality.

This falling away from the Church when one should need it most goes deeper and, perhaps, reflects on an erosion of what we call orthodoxy or right belief. We Anglicans have always taken great pride in orthodoxy.

And, while Orthodoxy represents the defining of the Faith as right belief, in a broader sense it can also represent the practice of that Faith.

Perhaps, we could trace the erosion of orthodoxy in mainstream Christianity to the Protestant Reformation.

The Protestant Reformation attacked not only the definition but also the practice of the Faith. The purifying zeal of the reformers stripped away not only the human errors but also many of the core elements of the worship of God that had their beginnings with Abraham and formed the standards of worship passed on to the Christian Church through the New Covenant.

The Psalmist set it forth when he said: ***O worship the Lord in the beauty of Holiness!*** a perfect description of orthodox worship where we can see orthodoxy from two perspectives as representing **Right Belief** on one hand and **Right Worship** on the other.

From our Anglican perspective, orthodoxy, in defining the Faith, transcends all Christian denominations and should always be the measure of their relevancy. Regardless of what the world thinks, there **must** be a standard of **Belief**. And it follows that there should always be a basic standard of worship not only to complement our **Belief** but also to satisfy our human obligation to God — to worship him in the ***Beauty of Holiness***.

So, as we bring this season of Advent to a close, and reflect upon **the Second Coming** of our Lord, let us take heed to remember that we are direct inheritors of the preaching, teaching, and liturgical practice of the Apostles through the Church Fathers and their successors. It is what we call **Right Belief** and **Right Practice**.

For this adherence to sound doctrine and steadfastness in faith, we, like John the Baptist, are the ***voice of one crying in the wilderness***.

In the Gospel passage from St. John for this Fourth Sunday in Advent, we see a delegation from the Sanhedran approaching John the Baptist. He had gained such popularity among the people that the leadership was concerned about his authority: where did it come from?

First, they inquired if he were the Messiah. If he were the Messiah, then he certainly would have the authority to preach and teach as he did, and to require all Jews to be baptized.

John replied that he was not the Messiah.

Again, they asked if he were Elijah. The Jews believed that Elijah would return to prepare the world for the coming of the Messiah.

John replied that he was not Elijah.

Finally, they asked if he were the expected prophet; the one alluded to by Moses in the Book of Deuteronomy, the ***Prophet par excellence***.

Again, John replied he was not that promised prophet.

If he were none of these, then what right did he have to baptize Jews? John does not answer directly; rather, he answered them saying:

I baptize with water: but there standeth one among you, whom ye know not;

He it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose.

Whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose, essentially to untie. That's an interesting response.

You see, in those days, to tie and untie the straps of shoes was the work of a slave. There was a Rabbinic saying that a disciple might do anything for his master except to untie his shoes. John, thus, is saying, that there is One coming whose slave he is not fit to be.

What remarkable insight from John the Baptist, to sum up his and our relationship to our Lord in just those few words: *Whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose.*

In reflection, this is a beautiful account from St. John's Gospel of the delegation questioning John the Baptist. It reveals to us the premise of John that, indeed, the King was coming, unlike any king you could imagine; and you must be cleansed to receive Him, Jews just as much as any Gentile: cleansed of their wicked and corrupt ways. They must prepare themselves for entry into this new kingdom.

***Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.
Make straight the way of the Lord.***

Make straight the way of the Lord. As you know, in ancient times, roads were barely ruts, or little more than worn paths. When royalty traveled, to make the way easier, messengers were sent ahead to clear the way; to level and straighten the roadways; to remove obstacles that might be in the way; and to let the people know that an important person was soon to arrive or pass by.

So, John's role was to be the preparer; the messenger; to clear the way for the coming of the King.

Now, as John the Baptist was the forerunner of Jesus Christ at his **First Coming**, so we are, in a real sense, the forerunners of Jesus Christ in his **Second Coming**. Most certainly, we Orthodox Christians seem to be the ones with the proper focus and resolve.

Our duty and commitment, our mission as the *voice of one crying in the wilderness*, is to proclaim to the world exactly what John the Baptist proclaimed: ***Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Make straight the way of the Lord.***

Directed to the Jews of his time, John's exhortation meant a change of mind, of principles; to give up the notion of justification by the law and the notion of the Messiah as a temporal king. Furthermore, this exhortation also encompassed a change in life and manners, for the state of the Jewish leadership at this time was that of corruption and wickedness.

In essence, John's call to repent was, for the Jews, directly in opposition to their doctrine of justification by works. Later, as we know, St. Paul set forth the Christian Doctrine of Justification by Faith that, in a real sense, carries forward John's Doctrine of Repentance. For example, the 16th verse of the 2nd chapter of Paul's Epistle to the Galatians:

Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified.

The Law, received from God by Moses and given to the Hebrews, had become convoluted over time. Indeed, the Law had reached the level where, adherence to it was paramount to salvation. But adherence to the Law was nearly impossible, it had become a millstone. It was devoid of hope.

That Law has been fulfilled in Jesus Christ, as St. Paul has pointed out so well — Jesus Christ Who brought Hope into the world.

So, we return to John the Baptist preaching and extolling the Jews that the kingdom of heaven was at hand; not the kind of kingdom the Jews were expecting, not a temporal kingdom; nor was John foretelling of a kingdom of glory, as human beings might expect in another world. Rather, the world was to enter into the kingdom of the Messiah, wherein his office and works would be made manifest. John was calling for people to prepare themselves for the **Gospel Dispensation**.

That **Gospel Dispensation** is now. We are in the midst of it.

Now, we have become the forerunners, forerunners of the Second Coming of the Messiah. We are charged with preparing the way, spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ in order to level the roadway, announcing to the world that the King is coming.

As Christians, we have a new message to add to that of John the Baptist: to love one another. Not only do we call upon the world to repent, as did John, but we also call upon the world to love: to love God and to love each other; to love our neighbors as ourselves; the fulfilling of the Law. We are to love all of God's Creation, a love not based on sentimentality but on a divine blueprint for all of humankind

Indeed, there can be no true repentance without love.

Now, as we await the yearly celebration of our Lord's **Nativity**, his **First Coming**, we also await and look forward to his **Second Coming**. We Christians live in expectation: now it is the expectation of Christ's **Second Coming**.

In this expectation, we play a role as forerunners who witness to a God of Love revealed through his Son, Jesus Christ, he Who came first into the world in love to redeem us from the ravages of sin, and to open our eyes to the eternal light; having become one of us and having experienced all that we experience, it is he who will return to render, with a firm but loving hand, the final judgment, that judgment which will bring us into everlasting union with our Father in Heaven.