

Well, as I mentioned last week, Advent is the season of preparation for the coming of the Lord. This has a dual meaning for us as reflected in the ecumenical creeds of the Church. We confess that He first came as our Redeemer, born of the Virgin Mary to suffer and die for us. But in the Nicene Creed, we also confess that He will come again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead. The season of Advent, therefore, puts the topic of preparation for the second coming of Christ front and center in our consciences. Certainly as Christians, the goal is that we should always be ready to receive Our Lord, Our Savior, and Our Judge.

Now to be found worthy in any task, one must prepare. For example, academic exams are a form of judgement, and it is a dreadful feeling to show up to an exam for which you are unprepared. No one relishes the opportunity to show just how little we actually know. Likewise, we do not want to give an account of ourselves to the Ultimate Judge, the Lord of All Creation, without being prepared. The stakes at that exam will be much higher.

This is how the church calendar, as established by Holy Mother Church in her wisdom, greatly supports us in our pursuit of Holiness. The calendar is a means of ordering time, redeeming the time, as St. Paul commends in the Epistle to the Ephesians chapter 5 verses 15 and 16. "See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil." Time, being a part of the created order, is fallen and corrupted. It has a way of lulling us into complacency. Time suggests to us that the Lord is not nigh, that He is slow in coming. The church year thus begins with Advent to shake us from slumber, to call out to us, "Wake, Awake, for night is flying. Cast away the works of darkness. Put on the armor of light." It is the signal that we are once again embarking on a journey with Christ, sojourning together with Him from the prophecies of His birth, to His Nativity, to His ministry and passion and death and resurrection and ascension. We walk in his very footsteps so that we may better understand and image Christ; so that we can be icons of Christ to the world.

Last week, we discussed how the *Scriptures* prepare us for Christ's Advent. But this week we see that the *Church* also is preparing us to stand before our Creator and Judge. Advent therefore is the Church's provision to prepare us for Christ's second coming. It is a warning to us to take these matters seriously. However, more to the point, on this Sunday we address more than the church's general provision. In particular, the propers today move us to consider the church's provision of ministers for us. First, in today's Collect, we recognize the prophets of old who prepared the way for the God who would *redeem* us. The prophets issued signs and warnings that pointed to the first coming of Christ. Similarly the Church's current-day ministers seek to prepare the way for the God who will come to judge us. Certainly these men still point to signs and warnings that Christ is nigh; He even is right here in our midst and within our hearts. But they also issue encouragements, admonitions, and teachings so that in the Day of the Lord, their flock, their congregation, would be found an acceptable people in the sight of God.

Is being a minister a position to be envied? Ask me in a couple of years! But, considering that John the Baptist spent his life in the howling wilderness, and then was imprisoned and beheaded, we conclude that the life of a minister is the life of one compelled to proclaim God's Truth with little regard to his personal comfort. The difficulty is that the pastor cannot make the people in the pews do what is good for them. He cannot force them. He has to convince the parishioners. He has to draw

them along. He has to make the intellectual argument that to live in the moment-by-moment presence of God is the best life; it is eternal life. And then he has to model this in His own life. I suppose that means He has to always convince himself of this truth as well. One thing is certain. It is not within the minister's power to change the hearts of the people entrusted to his care. He can only proclaim. But God works in such proclamations to change the hearts of those who have ears to hear the Spirit of God in the Word of God.

The first sentence of the Epistle lesson this morning stood out to me. St. Paul begins the 4th chapter of the First Epistle to the Corinthians with the following sentence: "Let a man so account of us, as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God." Most other versions translate the word "minister" here as "servant". For example, in the New King James Version, this verse reads: "Let a man so consider us, as *servants* of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God" (NKJV; emphasis added) In this sentence, Paul puts forth two roles of the pastor.

First he calls them "Ministers (servants) of Christ." I actually prefer the term "minister" in this case because I suspect that the word "servant" is too readily confused with our image of chattel slavery. The Greek word better reflects one who is in the employ of a man with authority. One of the earliest uses of this word refers to the Greek deity Hermes who was a minister of Zeus. Zeus would send Hermes to deliver his messages, so it was assumed that Hermes was acting with the authority of Zeus. Hermes was a representative, an ambassador, a minister of Zeus. So the Christian minister likewise acts in the authority of Christ, to deliver the message of Christ and to execute the will of Christ. Ultimately then, his service is evaluated/judged only by Christ. Though I am accountable to some extent both to you and to Bishops Sutton and Banek, that accountability is premised upon my ultimate and exclusive accountability to Christ.

Now understand that this Epistle was written by the Apostle Paul in order to address the mess at Corinth. Factions formed around various leaders... cliques claiming either Paul or Apollos in this case were at odds with each other. Paul is saying here that all ministers are only concerned about executing their duties in order to please their Lord, Jesus Christ Himself. The minister answers to Christ and must not be concerned with accruing power for himself. Such cliques are destructive, working against the unity of the Body of Christ. A significant part of these duties, therefore, is concerned with tending the flock of Christ. The minister's job is to win all and to bring the entire flock into maturity. So here we have a picture of the minister receiving the gifts of grace from Jesus (that is, Word and Sacrament) so that he may distribute them liberally to the Body of Christ in His parish. He acts on Christ's command to tend to those within his care. The real source of grace is Christ, but the minister "delivers" this grace, as it were, to the congregation.

The second role mentioned by St. Paul is that ministers are Stewards of the mysteries of God. In other words, it is not for ministers to make it up as they go. We are handed the core of Christian orthodoxy within the catholic and Anglican tradition, and that is what we must proclaim and teach and guard. This is what it is to be a steward – to protect what one has been entrusted with and to nurture it so that it will flourish. The steward does not have the right to tamper with the faith. The creeds summarize our beliefs, and it is our job to unpack it so that the knowledge of the mysteries of God, as He has revealed them to us by His Word, is better understood. If the creed says, "and he shall come to

judge the quick and the dead,” then, as a steward of God's mysteries, that is what I must proclaim. Now within the creedal and scriptural outline of faith, there is much room to maneuver. Some pastors may push things all the ways to the fence line, to the boundary. I think, however, that it is best for us to be right in the middle, to draw equally from all the fullness of the doctrine and practice with which we have been entrusted.

Now in this discussion so far, we have been rightly focused upon the *ordained* ministry. Bishops, Priests, and Deacons are very important, for ideally they direct all of their efforts toward the body of Christ attending as required to its health. Two things, however, must be noted about this.

First, your ministers and, more broadly your parish, need your prayers. So much, in fact, that the Church, particularly in the Anglican tradition, has set aside 12 days of the year for fasting and prayers for the ordained ministry. These are called Ember days and occur on Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday of the Ember weeks four times per year. Now wouldn't it be convenient, since we are discussing how Christ's ministers are accountable to Christ in order to prepare Christ's people for the coming of Christ, if this week was an Ember week? Well, this is not just a notion that we all have invented on the spot, for the Church has, in fact, set aside this week as an Ember week. Your fasting and prayers are asked—actually, per the prayer book, are required—this upcoming Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday. On the Ember days, we use the prayer on page 260 in particular. And I personally covet your prayers for my ministry here at Christ The King Anglican Church on those day, and always. I need the Spirit of God to execute my duties here so that we would grow into a healthy, strong, and God-glorifying parish. I need *your* ministrations to be effective in *my* ministrations. Also, you will remember Deacon Ed who came out to provide services once or twice last year. He is appropriately being ordained to the Presbyterate, the Priesthood, this coming Ember Wednesday. I would request that you also spend time lifting him up in prayer that the full gifting of the Holy Spirit would come to him to give him wisdom and strengthen him in his new duties.

Secondly, during the Reformation, the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers was recovered. Previously, the ordained ministry was considered to have something of a superior spirituality. The laity was, as it were, second-class Christians. This is not at all the case. Priests and pastors struggle as much as, if not more than, any non-ordained person. We are NOT super Christians. We have been trained by the Church and gifted through ordination to exercise a ministry of teaching and preaching and leadership. Ordained men have been duly appointed to exercise the authority of the Church in the local parish and to establish and maintain order in the Body of Christ. But you all are also ministers of the grace of Christ to the world. In other words: the health and growth of this parish isn't just upon me. You all must have a ministry in this parish to our congregation here assembled and to the broader Church.

Therefore the challenge to you this morning: ask yourself, “What is my ministry here at Christ the King Anglican Church?” This is beyond showing up for worship, which is expected, of course. My point is that every one of you should have some ownership in this parish; some skin in the game. If you want to see this parish grow, every person will need to contribute of their time and talent, and not just their treasure. We are not called just to take in from the Parish. We are called to love the world, which refers to everyone, but to your Christian brothers and sisters here gathered in particular. We

have some needs in the parish that we will go over later. None of these jobs are all-consuming, but they will require a commitment; but this is a great way for you to exercise love for the brethren. Likewise, if you see a different need in our church that you would like to address, talk to me about it. It is best when people fill the needs that they care about and for which they are gifted.

Preparedness is not about cramming for an exam. It is about living out your moments and days with the awareness of God's presence with you. It is about always being ready, not just for His second coming, but living in the reality of the resurrection life now. The Church and her ministers will work diligently to help you in this pilgrimage, but the journey can only be made by you. You are required to embrace the adventure of a life with Christ which means that you are Christ's minister as well.

As we now turn to the Table of the Lord, we know that in this feast, He will assure us that we are very members incorporate in the mystical body of the Son, and that He will assist us with His grace so that we may continue in the holy fellowship, and do all such good works as He has prepared for us to walk in. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. AMEN.