

In the gospel lesson this morning, we see the imprisoned St. John the Baptist sending two of his followers to Jesus. What John had actually heard about Jesus, we don't know, but it seems that there was some doubt in John's mind about Jesus' ministry. Was Jesus really the messiah? It sure didn't seem that way from John's perspective. We can certainly be sympathetic to John the Baptist here. Prison in that day was brutal. The messiah was to come and fix all things, and yet John perceived only that things were falling down around him. John wanted Jesus to behave differently, to fix it all already. Maybe John didn't believe that Jesus was "doing his job."

Instead, what should have been John's behavior here? John's mission was to prepare the way for Jesus. At the baptism of Christ, he saw the heavens opened, and the Spirit descending, and the voice of God declaring that Christ was the beloved Son of God with whom God was well pleased. He knew who Jesus was. But having done his job, John's prophetic role was now ending, and he would soon be beheaded. This is far from a fairy-tale ending. But still John needed to be focused upon his calling, upon performing the duties that he had been given to the best of his ability. He should not be focused on what what Jesus' ministry was, or "helpfully" suggesting how Jesus should better perform His mission.

Each of us, in John's same position, would likely be judgmental of how Jesus was conducting His ministry. But neither would we be justified in judging Jesus – of course not – far be it from us. But we still have a tendency to judge one another. Are we anymore justified in this? May I suggest that each of us are called to a unique ministry within the body of Christ, and that we need to be primarily concerned with executing our own roles instead of being critical of how others perform their roles in their callings? Let us have strength in our own convictions, and convictions shaped by our individual callings.

Now what do I mean by this? First, let us acknowledge that we all are called to different roles within the Church. In God's providence, I have been called to ordained ministry. There are certain privileges associated with this, but also certainly more duties and responsibilities. I am called to study the Word of God and to proclaim the gospel and to bring admonitions from the written Word to the people of God during our worship. I am also called to lead the congregation in the study of the Word. And there are other practical responsibilities as well such as overseeing the music of our parish, planning for parish events, overseeing the administration of the parish, and praying regularly for, and compassionately tending to, the souls in this parish. There is quite a lot involved, and I am far from a perfect priest.

Now what about you? You all are Christians and members of our parish. As such, you all have some common callings and duties. What are your various duties as laymen? The best concise summary of a Christian's duty that I know of is found in the Offices of Instruction in the Book of Common prayer:

Question. What is your duty towards God?

Answer. My duty towards God is To believe in him, to fear him, And to love him with all my heart, with all my mind, with all my soul, and with all my strength:

I., II. To worship him, to give him thanks: To put my whole trust in him, to call upon him:

III. To honour his holy Name and his Word:

IV. And to serve him truly all the days of my life.

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Question. What is your bounden duty as a member of the Church?

Answer. My bounden duty is to follow Christ, to worship God every Sunday in his Church; and to work and pray and give for the spread of his kingdom.

What we didn't read here, for the sake of time, was our duty towards our neighbors. These are based upon the Ten Commandments and follow right after our duty towards God. Reviewing the Offices of Instruction is a good exercise: maybe consider it to be homework this week. Read through both of the offices of instruction beginning on page 283 of the BCP. These are unique services, beautiful in their simplicity and innocence, comprised of a catechism embedded with prayer.

The point here is that Christians have duties. We have ethical responsibilities to God and to our neighbors – in other words we must behave a certain way. And because we are incorporated into Christ's body, we have duties toward the Church and towards our brothers and sisters in the Church. All of these duties are comprehended in the first and second greatest commandments which we hear every single week:

THOU shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it; Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.

Now we hear this every week, but what does it look like for us to love each other? Of course it means that we don't commit sins against one another. But also this means that we do not judge each other; perhaps this is the hardest thing of all to do. Many things fall under the heading of "judging," but let us not exclude the harboring of disparaging or covetous thoughts toward other people. For instance, your priest may be tempted to think: "So-and-so didn't make it to church today, don't they realize how that affects other people?" Or, "Why do so few people make it to daily prayer? It is so important for individual and corporate spiritual formation, and our parish needs to be characterized by the discipline of prayer." Or even, "I hope a few people show up for the work day," or, "We need to be inviting people, bringing people in, to our outreach events," or ... well, you get the idea.

Now, I will be honest here. This is your priest confessing to you and asking your forgiveness. I've had all of these thoughts. These are judgmental thoughts, they are not loving thoughts.- Please forgive me for being judgmental in these ways. All of these behaviors that I desire to see in our parish are in themselves good, and it would be a blessing for our parish to make progress in some of these things. The problem comes about when I presume to be able to dictate what you all should do. Implicit in such a statement is that I am doing most things in a perfectly sacrificial way and therefore have the prerogative of judging others for failing in my expectations for them. The problem is that I neither know your minds nor your hearts nor your circumstances, in the perfect way that I would need to, in order to dictate to you what you must do.

No, besides the duties mentioned earlier, it is my duty to think of you all, my brothers and sisters in Christ, not with a critical spirit, but with a generous spirit. In my heart, I must constantly give you to God, and I must constantly pray for you so that I may know how best to encourage you in your spiritual journey toward Christ, not to condemn you based upon my presumptions.

However, for the sake of completeness here, I will also mention that it is my duty as well to guard the table. God forbid that anyone of our parishioners would be involved with, and unrepentant in, grievous sin of which I was aware. In such a case, it would be my responsibility to not serve them the Body and Blood of the Lord until such time as they would confess and repent of their sins. Pray that this would never be the case here at Christ the King, and pray for me that I would have the wisdom and zeal for the Lord to hold the line in such a situation.

But now, my brothers and sisters, I must hold up the mirror a little. I am not alone in judging

others. This is a temptation for all of us. Every person on this planet thinks that their story is the hardest, that their own life is the most difficult, because we are most familiar with our own individuals stories. We know all of the difficulties that we have personally experienced. But to love our neighbors as ourselves is to not presume that because only we really know our own lives, everyone else has it relatively easy. Therefore we are not to complain when ... say... Fr. Kent doesn't do what we KNOW he ought to do. "What's wrong with that guy anyway?"

We are all, each of us, to treat each other with generosity, not with judgment. We are not to be like Martha of Bethany in Luke 10 – slaving away in the kitchen and complaining that her sister Mary wasn't helping like Martha thought she should. Rather we are to take St. Paul's words to the Philippian believers to heart. Toward the beginning of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Chapter of Philippians, St. Paul says, "ulfil ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; *but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves.*"

Now I suspect *everyone* here is thinking, "I hate it when he preaches at me like that." But if we all are thinking this, it is not because I am thinking of anyone or anything in particular. This is simply a common issue in all communities. We each think that we do more, that we have more pain in serving, than anyone else. But because it is so common, we have to work even harder to love each other by refusing to judge one another.

In the epistle this morning, St. Paul is also dealing with critical and judgmental attitudes in the Corinthians. The specific issue here is that these believers are judging his ministry. He begins this section by affirming that he and his companions are indeed ministers of Christ, and as such, they are also a stewards of the mysteries of God, the true doctrines that have been revealed to them through the scriptures and through their first-hand knowledge of Jesus. They are therefore responsible *to God* to be careful in handling that with which they have been entrusted. They are responsible to God for their ministrations. They are not directly accountable to those to whom they minister or even to their own consciences. In other words, they will answer to God for their actions, so pleasing Him in everything is their primary concern. This doesn't mean that their ministry to others is unimportant. Rather it means the exact opposite. Their ministry is vitally important because it was given them by God. The Corinthian believers were criticizing the work that St. Paul and his companions were doing among them, because these believers were being called out by the apostle for open and noto-

rious sin. St. Paul responds by saying that his concern was to please God and therefore he would not just turn a blind eye to the sins so prevalent in the Corinthian church.

The apostle continues, “but he that judgeth me is the Lord. Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come.” He that judgeth me is the Lord. We all need to seriously meditate upon these words. Yes, I am an ordained minister in the Church, but you too are all ordained by God as His children and are to proclaim the mysteries of God to the world. Therefore all of us should be principally concerned with our own testimonies before God in that great day instead of being wrapped up in what anyone else does or doesn’t do. We are to be generous to others, while being careful and self-critical about our own attitudes and service to our Lord Jesus Christ. Our hearts’ true intents are open to Jesus, even though we do not completely understand just how self-deceived we are. But one day, all of the layers of self-protective guile will be removed, and we will be called upon to give an account of our judgmental thoughts and actions and words.

So are we ready for that day? That is the question that this season of Advent poses to us. Christ has come. Christ comes to us now. Christ will come again to judge the quick and the dead for He is the only worthy judge. All hearts are laid bare before Him. We will not escape judgment, therefore let us not presume to judge others. Rather, judge therefore yourselves as best you can, my brothers and sisters, that ye be not judged of the Lord.

Yes, this is a warning to us. This entire season is a warning to us to prepare for the coming of the Lord. But also we must not forget that we are judged by Christ not as enemies, but as His beloved brothers and sisters, not to condemnation, but to eternal life. Therefore, let us nurture our love for Christ in our daily routine, and may our growing love for Him overflow into a greater love for our neighbors. Let us put aside judgment and instead, see and receive one another as blessings, for the presence of each person here makes a difference, and makes our worship more glorious. We are the family of God, even with all of our squabbles and foibles. So let us put aside the critical spirit and let us take on the spirit of love.

The epistle ends this morning by saying that Christ, “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.*” There are two ways that we can read the English here. The first is that every man will have praise *for* God for revealing our hearts’ deceitfulness to us and for purging the sin nature from us. And second, that every man will have praise *from* God for if Christ has been alive in our hearts in this world, then there will be so many things that we have done for

each other in the love of Christ of which we are unaware and for which we will be rewarded by our Heavenly Father. Which of these readings is correct?

For now, let us take them both—because this is where we desire to live. This is where it is good and beautiful to live. Not in a world of condemnation, but in a world where we give all of ourselves to God and where He smiles joyfully upon us. You may have noticed that our candle is rose today instead of purple because today is Gaudete Sunday. Gaudete is a Latin imperative that is translated “rejoice!” and the name comes from the traditional introit beginning, “Rejoice in Lord, O ye righteous; for it becometh well the just to be thankful.”

And why should we not be thankful when we have passed from judgment to joy? May we therefore extend to each other the joy that God has extended to us. Judgment is for God. Joy is for us. God grant that we would everyday truly proclaim with all of our heart, “Rejoice in Lord, O ye righteous; for it becometh well the just to be thankful.”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. AMEN.