

The Third Sunday of Advent

“Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee”

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost- Amen

With only a few days left before the Feast of the Nativity of our Lord, I suppose that there are very few of us who are not well into the sometimes hectic and often stressful work of preparing for the Christmas holidays. Whether it is shopping, decorating, baking or waiting for the arrival of loved ones, this is by all accounts a most joyful and yet taxing time of year. How anxious we are that Christmas Eve finds us prepared to welcome the festivities of this month with joy and anticipation. Each of us are aware of the temptation to be swallowed up by the cultural avalanche of parties, gift giving, and feasting that is expected. There is certainly nothing wrong with these outward preparations, but in the season of Advent, the Church reminds us that our preparations must include, at their heart, the inner preparation of the soul. All of the outward trimmings of Christmas can disappear, and yet, if our inner life is prepared to receive the Lord at his coming, no lack of outward tinsel and abundance can dampen our joy.

In today’s Gospel we read of one who answered the call to prepare. St. John the Baptist was raised up by Almighty God and given the vocation to stand and witness to the coming of the Messiah. He was to be the herald of the Lord’s coming. He was to be the one who would point the world to Christ. John the Baptist proclaimed that the one so long expected and longed for by the Prophets of old was here. We remember the words of John as Jesus walked by: *“Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”* Yes, John was called to announce to all men that the promised One- the Saviour of the world -- walked the earth! To welcome this promised One, the Baptist called all to repent, to prepare, to open their hearts to Him who is the Word made flesh.

We read that John was in prison and that he sent his followers to the Lord Jesus to confirm that the blessed, life-giving work of the Kingdom of God had begun. Our Blessed Lord tells these inquirers to return to their teacher and prophet and relate to him that the deaf hear, the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the poor have the Gospel preached to them and the dead are raised to life again. Imagine the joy that St. John the Baptist must have felt as he heard these things, and we can only imagine the sense of excitement that filled the hearts of his disciples. Here was the answer to the faithfulness of John the Baptist to his vocation – to learn that the power of God was filling the world with healing and hope.

Dear friends, there is much in the life and witness of John the Baptist that can help us as we seek to live a life of faithfulness to the precious and life-giving Gospel that we so love. John stands as an example to each of us as one who proved himself, by God’s grace, to be a trustworthy messenger of the will of God. He stands as a faithful steward of the mysteries of God that were entrusted to him. Above all, he challenges us to do the work of preparation and to welcome the blessed reign of God in our own hearts and lives.

St. Paul understood what this is all about. In his First Epistle to the Corinthians, he underlines the importance of witness and stewardship. Paul identifies himself as a minister and steward of the mysteries of God. This grace-filled vocation, to seek the lost and guide them into the way of life was the great love of his life. Like St. John the Baptist, St. Paul remained faithful to his call and proved himself worthy of the trust that our Lord had placed in him. Notice friends what the Apostle to the Gentiles says about the first requirement of those who are given this spiritual ministry and stewardship -- that they must be found faithful. It seems to be such a simple thing, and yet faithfulness is the very key that unlocks the treasures of heaven. We think of the faithfulness of both St. Paul and St. John the Baptist -- a faithfulness which resulted in both of them being martyred for their testimony. As we think of the history of the Church, we remember the great cloud of witnesses who have stood fast for 'the faith once delivered to the saints'. In our own day we think of all those who have been faithful to their Baptismal promises, and who have been shining lights and have inspired us in our Christian vocation.

As we approach the end of this Sacred season of Advent, we need to be focused on the living out of our faith. We need to be prepared to celebrate our Lord's first coming to us in humility and love at the stable in Bethlehem, as well as for His promised return in power and great glory. If this is true for us, then surely these requirements of faithful watching, and stewardship of the mysteries of God is true for the church as well.

The Collect for today speaks of the vocation of the church, especially those who are called to ministry. We pray that those in Holy Orders and having spiritual authority over us would be faithful to their trust -- not bowing to the pressures of a culture that is ever-changing, but rather seeking to call men and women everywhere to find true and lasting Life. Here is the profound privilege and vocation of the church -- for both clergy and laity -- to announce that Life has come to the world, and that forgiveness and everlasting life are a blessed reality for all who will humble themselves under the yoke of Christ.

Friends, there is much for us to think and pray about in today's readings. There is the call to prepare, the call to faithfulness, the call to obedience and especially the call to be renewed in love. Soon we will gather at the Christmas Crib to behold and contemplate the mystery of Divine Love made flesh for us. Until then, we can take comfort and hope in the sure promise of Advent -- that as our Blessed Lord Jesus has come in the poverty of the stable, so we look for Him to return to our world in the clouds of glory as our King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

As we come today to receive the Lord Jesus in the Holy Communion, I pray that each one of us will commit ourselves to Him anew. May we all seek to be steadfast and constant in our love for Him. Let us each pray for a greater desire to walk before Him in holiness and humility. Let's make every part of our lives, including our Christmas preparations, opportunities for showing in some small and imperfect way, that Christ is our Life and our best Love. You and I have been given a stewardship over the life of our souls. Each of us is responsible for nurturing the life that

the Holy Trinity has planted in us by the Holy Ghost. May we do it joyfully, looking unto Jesus, the Author and Finisher of our faith!

Blessed be God for All Things! Amen.