

Joyful Anticipation

Preached on the Third Sunday in Advent
Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ
Dec. 13, 2020
Text: Matt. 11: 2-10

Today is Gaudete Sunday, also known as “Rose Sunday.” Gaudete is the Latin for “Rejoice!” and the particular case it is in expresses an order, announcement, or command in the imperative. “Rejoice!” It is found in the Missal’s Introit today and as well in next Sunday’s Epistle reading. “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice,” writes Paul. (Phil. 4: 4) Like Laetare Sunday in Lent, today is a celebration within a penitential season. We should put ourselves in the shoes of God’s people before the Incarnation, expecting and hoping for a savior, looking with expectation and joyful anticipation for the One Who would rescue us from sin, death, and hopelessness.

So we are to rejoice today. But, on the other hand, our Gospel today concerns John the Baptist, who is not known for celebration and joy. In the verses following our Gospel reading, Our Lord says that John is the “Elijah who is to come” as promised in the Old Testament. And like the prophet Elijah, John the Baptist spoke harsh truth to the religious and political leaders of his day, even calling them a “brood of vipers” at one point. And like the powers in Elijah’s day, Herod, the Pharisees, and the Sadducees considered John a “troubler of Israel,” not seeing that their sin and corruption was what had truly brought about all the trouble.

But there is indeed more to St. John the Baptist than this. He’s not only the wild-eyed fire-and-brimstone preacher who wore weird clothes and dunked folks in the River Jordan. St. Luke tells us that the first time he was in the presence of Jesus, when both he and Our Lord were still in their mothers’ wombs, John leaped for joy, causing St. Elizabeth to realize the special role of the Blessed Virgin Mary as the bearer of the Lord. Later on, when Jesus’ ministry was growing, both he and John were baptizing in the same area, and John’s disciples were getting a bit jealous. John tells them that he is merely the “friend of the bridegroom,” the best man, as it were.

The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:29-30).

You see, for John, preparing for the Lord’s coming and being the one who would “make straight” the way of the Lord was indeed the fulfilment of his joy. Repentance, or turning from the World, the Flesh, and the Devil to God through the person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ, is the path to true and everlasting joy.

Our Gospel passage picks up later in John’s life, when he was in prison for his preaching, awaiting the inevitable sentence of death.

Now when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?"

It is natural, when reading this passage, to assume that St. John was having doubts while in prison. After all, things hadn't gone particularly well for him, and perhaps he was questioning whether he really was a prophet. Maybe this was just John's low point.

Maybe, but not likely. Again, John recognized Jesus, and leapt for joy, before he was even born. About thirty years later, John had seen the Holy Ghost descend on Jesus during his baptism, and he had heard the Father speaking His approval. John is the one who said of Jesus "Behold the Lamb of God who taketh away the sins of the world!" It's pretty hard to believe that John had doubts about Jesus.

But what about John's disciples? There's a sense in which it's a little odd that John still has disciples at all. He knew and had told them that his role was to decrease while Jesus increased. As Jesus says later in the Gospel and as we prayed in the Collect, John's role was to be the messenger who prepared the way before the coming of the Lord Jesus. John's entire ministry was about exalting Christ. But that doesn't mean his disciples fully understood his mission. How does John solve this problem? He sends the disciples to Jesus, so that they may also rejoice in the bridegroom's voice.

In our Collect, we're reminded that we priests, pastors, deacons, and even bishops, are similarly tasked to prepare the way for the coming of the Lord. Just like it wasn't enough to be a disciple of John, it's also not enough to be an Anglican or Baptist or Catholic or whatever. First and foremost we must all be followers of Christ. And just like St. John sent his disciples to meet Jesus, so are all Christians tasked to show others the way to Jesus. Ministers are especially to do so through Word and Sacrament, that those who come might truly meet Jesus. As great as our tradition is, as beautiful as our hymns, vestments, and heritage are, their point is lost if they don't lead people to the joy of knowing and following our Lord.

So, in His answer to John's disciples. Jesus says:

"Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."

It is interesting that Jesus didn't tell them what happened when John baptized Him. He didn't give them a theological treatise. He didn't even tell them a parable. He pointed to His miracles, to His works. The miracles and messianic works weren't what made Jesus the Messiah, but they were the proof or fruit of his messiahship. The things that he did are the things that the Scriptures said the Messiah would do. We read, for example, the words of the Prophet Isaiah: "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy" (Isaiah 35:5).

Similarly, our good works don't make us Christians, but they are the fruit of being a Christian. Article XII in the 39 Articles of Religion, one of the chief formularies of the Anglican Tradition, says that good works are the result of healthy, living faith in the same way that good fruit are the result of a healthy, living fruit tree. And even though our good works are still tainted by our fallen flesh, we belong to Christ, and so our good works are pleasing and acceptable to the Father for the sake of his Son. Isaiah prophesied that the Messiah would cause the tongue of the mute to sing for joy. The miracles and works of our Lord were indeed for His glory, but they were also for the benefit of His people. Our good works are the same; they glorify Jesus and benefit our neighbor. The Lord doesn't need us to bring Him glory; He already has it. But our neighbor needs those good works. Our neighbor needs to see Christians acting like Christ, thus bringing Him glory and making the world more like the Kingdom.

As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written, Behold, I sent my messenger before your face who will prepare your way before you.

John was a prophet, and he looked the part. Everything about John screamed "prophet." There was no ambiguity about John. And he was always clear about his role: preparing the way for Jesus. This is what brought him joy. Our Collect says that we who are ministers of the Gospel have the same calling: we are to prepare the way for Jesus' second coming. Like John, we must decrease, and Jesus must increase. In the verse following our Gospel reading, Jesus said that though there had been no one born who was greater than John the Baptist, the least in the kingdom of heaven is even greater.

Because John died before Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, there is a sense in which he was the last of the Old Testament saints. He had the joy of the Messiah's coming, but he didn't live to see the inauguration of the New Covenant in our Lord's Passion, Death, and Resurrection. He didn't live to see the coming of the Holy Ghost at Pentecost. But these are all things that we have as baptized Christians. John was the friend of the Bridegroom. We are the Bride. As complete as John's joy was, how much greater joy ought you and I to have? "Rejoice ye in the Lord, and again I say, rejoice... the Lord is at hand."

In the Name...