

A Sermon for the Third Sunday in Advent, December 17, 2006

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Today's collect describes the correspondence between the ministry of John the Baptist and Christian ministry. John prepared Israel for the first coming of Jesus; ministry in the church prepares people for his second coming.

John's ministry of preparation was necessary because the people weren't ready. The people wanted the Messiah to come, but they did not understand what his coming meant. As the prophet Malachi wrote:

The Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple...But who may abide the day of his coming? and who shall stand when he appears; for he is like a refiner's fire, and like fullers' soap (3:1-2).

The Messiah wasn't coming to put his stamp of approval on the status quo. He was coming to turn the world upside down—"to put down the mighty from their seat and exalt the humble and meek." This is what Jesus did in Israel. He overthrew the current leadership and brought an end to the temple age. He established a new Israel on the foundation of the twelve apostles.

Someone had to come before him to get the people ready for this change. John was the guy. His message was, "Repent!" which means, Change! Change the way you are living. Stop being unfaithful and disobedient. Live in a new way that shows that you love God and are sorry for your sins.

The new Israel, the church, looks for the Second Coming of Jesus. We pray, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done." We affirm, constantly, that "He shall come again with glory, to judge both the quick and the dead." But, again, "Who may abide the day of his coming? and who shall stand when he appears; for he is like a refiner's fire, and like fullers' soap."

Our preparation for the Second Coming of Christ is different from Israel's preparation for his first coming. Jesus is, in a sense, already with us. He lives within us through the baptismal gift of the Holy Spirit. We are members of his body. The Christian life is life "in Christ." The Second Coming will be the completion of what we already have, the fuller revelation of that which we now know in part.

We see this in the Eucharist. Jesus comes to us in the sacramental signs and we are gathered around the altar to meet him in a manner that foreshadows the end of time. Each week we hear the Baptist's call, "Ye who do truly and earnestly repent." This is a liturgical reminder that we are not ready to receive Christ unless we are prepared to change. For Jesus comes to us, even now, "like a refiner's fire and a fuller's soap." He comes to turn our lives upside down, to purify and cleanse, to root out sin and evil and to establish righteousness and peace.

Because Jesus has already come to us in baptism; because he continues to come to us in the life of prayer; because he will come again at the end of time, we process the call to repent on three levels.

There is an initial time of repentance when we first understand our sins in the light of Christ and begin to reorder our lives around faith in him. Old patterns of behavior give way to a new life of grace.

Then there is an ongoing experience of repentance. There are areas of our lives that remain unchanged—perhaps we were willing to go thus far and no farther—and the Holy Spirit brings our attention back to these in due time.

There is also a tendency for human nature to drift back into unfaithful patterns of behavior. We need, on a somewhat regular basis, to remember again the call to repent.

There is a further danger that our practice of the faith will over time regress into a religious routine that no longer challenges our unfaithful habits. This is the error of the Pharisees, who were extremely religious, but rejected Jesus.

We have drifted into this error if our practice of the faith no longer has the power to make us uncomfortable; if we never feel the sting of conviction of sin, which is the very prerequisite for forgiveness. We must not allow our long familiarity with the liturgy to obscure the message of the Baptist. We must change to be ready for Christ.

When we rise to the life immortal on the last day, the experience of repentance, of change into the image of Christ, will be completed. The daily struggle will give way to final victory; the daily picking up of the cross will give way to a final experience of resurrection. Christ will rule in the world and in every heart and mind.

Jesus is coming! John the Baptist gets us with his timeless exhortation: “Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand!”