The Third Sunday in Advent

Holy Communion

Holy Trinity Utrecht – 13 December AD 2020

1 Corinthians 4:1-5 St. Matthew 11:2-10

*This is how one should regard us,*

*as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.*

We speak of this season of Advent being one full of expectation and hope.

I think we have a general sense of what that means. There are certain things that we look forward to – probably a holiday from work for some of you, a time with loved ones, no doubt some feasting! – if you are a child it might include hoping for gifts. But there is something in the air. We can’t quite put our finger on it, but we hope for it.

From a religious point of view, we hope to grasp better, beyond the simple story, more of the profundity of God’s coming in the flesh to dwell among us. The expectation may be that when we observe this feast of Christmas we will come closer to Jesus.

Like the Cross of Jesus, which we hold before our eyes, never quite understanding the love it reveals or the encouragement or the guide it can become to our life, so it is with God coming to us in the flesh, with the incarnation of Jesus Christ, it is a mystery to be unfolded further.

**These things are mysteries** – something is known, something is unknown.

The creation of our souls and bodies in God’s image, our fall from paradise, the birth, life, death, resurrection, ascension and the promised coming again of Jesus Christ, the forgiveness and freedom from shame He offers, the pouring out of His Spirit, his building up of His Church on earth and the promises of glory – all these are elements of our faith that we profess in the Creeds. But by knowing something about them, we don’t by any means exhaust their meaning. If we’re honest we admit we know don’t know it all, we only know a tiny bit.

Thomas Aquinas says that faith is this peculiar mix of knowing and unknowing – it contains “an element of perfection and an element of imperfection. The perfection [is there] in the firmness of assent, the imperfection [is there] in the fact that no vision operates – with the result that the believer is troubled by a lingering “mental unrest”.” [Pieper, Faith, Hope, Love, p. 50]

Two years ago on the third Sunday in Advent, I was preparing for my own marriage, which was two weeks later. And I mentioned that I was thinking about how this description of faith is quite like marriage – you make a firm assent to be with one person for life – and yet there is an element of unknowing of what will come about. We are told beautiful things, and we see examples around us of beautiful marriages. So you make the firm promise. And yet there is some mental unrest in that. And that very unrest makes one diligent to seek to make the marriage good – reading about it, speaking with each other, and with others who have more experience about it. Almost two years later, I can affirm from limited experience that marriage is indeed a great good! And also, that I have much to learn!

The life of faith is like this – the mental unrest between the certainty and uncertainty keeps us diligent in the path to make sure we are going in the right direction. Since my more wholehearted conversion to Jesus 34 years ago, there has been growth, but there remains certainty and uncertainty, as I cannot possibly grasp the fulness of who God is. I keep my eyes open, ready to be challenged, seeking always the advice of others, and holding fast to what I know to be true.

We see this in the Gospel today in John the Baptist – certainty combined with uncertainty – an asking continually the advice of other ministers, in his case the chief minister and steward of the mysteries of God – Jesus Christ himself. John was no doubt strengthened by Jesus’ answer as he awaited his death in prison.

But we can only come to know the life of faith as we choose it, and seek to live it – and we do this because we’ve seen enough and we are perhaps tired with finding dead ends. In the same way that we can’t know the life of marriage before being married – we can’t know the life of faith without choosing it, and then we see what happens. It is proper that certainty and uncertainty remains.

Last week we looked at the gift of the Bible to encourage us with hope in these uncertainties. But we also know the Bible is not an easy book. It speaks of a life that we do not yet know, has poetry alluding to higher things and parables that hint and work in our minds – they speak about that other kingdom, the allusive kingdom of heaven coming on earth. Because of these difficulties and our own spiritual immaturity, the Bible on its own is insufficient.

This is why we also need human guides in our walk of faith in Jesus Christ.

Our readings and Collect today speak about this gift of ministers in preparing ourselves for the coming of Jesus Christ at the end of time and for his present coming to our souls by grace.

In today’s Epistle, Paul says that he is a servant or *minister of Christ and a steward of the mysteries of God*. *Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful.*

What is it for us to be faithful stewards of the mysteries of God?

In the Gospel Jesus points to a faithful steward, John the Baptist, as an example for all of us. Jesus describes something of his character. He asks the people what motivated them to seek out John the Baptist. Jesus is saying that we already know in our hearts what is a faithful steward:

*“What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind?*

* faithful stewards do not get easily blown this way and that by the times they are living in – a steadfastness is looked for by people seeking guidance about God – because God is unchanging.

*What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings’ houses.*

* a faithful steward is not interested in worldly success or in a soft and comfortable life, and people are not looking for some easy answer, they recognize the kingdom of heaven comes with struggle and a certain asceticism.

*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 send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.’*

* John’s message was one of repentance and holiness of life as a preparation for the Kingdom of heaven, as the prophets all say – there is no shortcut. But the prophetic aspect includes also a pointing to the One who can bring us into that Kingdom – Jesus Christ.

And we see John’s faithfulness from the circumstances of his life – we learn that he was in prison because of his call to Herod to repent for living with his brother’s wife. His ministry was a call to holiness of life. And we learn that if we are faithful stewards we will not always be received gratefully. A certain pushback should be expected – remember that Jesus Himself was crucified.

There is one other test in today’s Gospel to know if a minister is being faithful, it is in the example of the ministry of Jesus himself:

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.”*

The ultimate test to see if we are being faithful stewards of God’s mysteries is this: are people being liberated by our words? Are they experiencing greater flourishing? or are they being further oppressed?

* When we speak, are the lights coming on: do people say, yes, now I understand, now I see! Thank you!
* Are people who have been held back, paralyzed in some way from loving, by fear, by trauma, or some other cause, are they finding themselves freed up to love again because of the words we speak, because we are giving the right advice, just at the right time, and in the right way?
* Are those who are at the point of giving up on life, now experiencing a renewal in their heart from our words and example?
* Are we speaking good news to the poor in spirit, that brings joy and light to those who dwell in darkness?

If so, then we are being faithful stewards of the mysteries of God. These are the signs of the Kingdom of God breaking into our midst – these are the signs we should be seeing here at Holy Trinity Church in Utrecht and in our individual lives, our encounters with family, friends, those we encounter.

Today, as every Sunday, following the ministry of John the Baptist, we are called to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ.

We will now have the Sacrament of Christ’s death presented before us and we are promised that if we come forward in faith we will receive his risen life.

Let us prepare ourselves now to put off sorrow and sadness and to know gladness and joy.

Amen +