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Advent3(2022)

**Announcements:**

*'And blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me.'*

 Last week traditionally has been called “Scripture" or "Bible" Sunday within the Anglican world because of that day's prayer and lessons. Today, Rose (*Gaudete*) Sunday, the mid-point of Advent, just as easily could be called, “Ministers' Sunday”, because of its prayer and lessons. All three deal with the mission of ministry.

 Our Gospel concludes by telling all that God is “sending my messenger before thee”, namely John the Baptist. John the Baptist is considered the last of the Old Testament prophets. He delivered a message from God, just as Elijah, Isaiah, Ezekial, Daniel and others had.

 John serves as the bridge from the Old to the New Testament. When Old Testament prophecies mentioned the coming of Israel's messiah they looked to the future. With John the Baptist we have the announcement from him that the future is now! Behold the Lamb of God!

 St. Paul's Epistle to the Corinthians talks of ministers of Christ as “stewards of the mysteries of God”. And our Collectfor the Day echoes both lessons by asking that the Lord: "Grant that the ministers and stewards of thy mysteries make ready thy way". To complete this *ministerial* theme we only need to look at our church calendar to see that this Wednesday, Thursday, and Saturday are "Ember days". Four times a year, close to the change of seasons, we have Ember weeks when we pray for the clergy. (Ember days were dropped in the Episcopal and Roman Churches in the early '70s.)

 One of the duties of the clergy is apparent in our Gospel, namely, to prepare the way for the Lord's Second Coming. Last week we heard about the **signs** that would proceed his Second Coming: signs in the earth, the water, and the sky.

 While Ordained clergy have a unique stewardship over the seven Sacraments, the mystery of Jesus' incarnation and life, the Trinity, and all the teachings of the Church are in the care of **each** one of us in our daily life. As stewards we are to help safeguard what is entrusted to us, but **also** help them to grow. (We might remember the parable about the steward who only safeguarded the money given to him and did not even invest it in a bank.) Thus, it is not quite good enough to be a good Christian; we need to try to spread the Gospel as well in our lives.

 The purpose for all this ministering and stewarding is to "prepare the way of the Lord". Why? So that upon his return Jesus might “find faith on the earth”. To ensure that end involves working to make certain that as many people as possible are believers, while recognizing that very many will not. As a first step in that regard--making believers out of people--- means folks must not be “offended” by Jesus, as he himself warned John the Baptist's disciples.

 These men had been sent to inquire of Jesus whether he was the “Real McCoy” or whether the genuine Messiah was yet to appear. Jesus told them to report what his actions, report the miracles. Actions speak louder than words. Then he ended his remarks to them with the admonishment, “Blessed is he who is not offended” by me.

 We might wonder how anyone could be offended by Jesus who did so many great miracles, died a grisly death for us, and in our Lessons never seemed to “hurt a fly”. Yet, then as now, people **have** been offended by Jesus. The Pharisees were offended because Jesus seemed to mock their copious rule keeping. But also, the Pharisees thought their Messiah would be another King David, a great warrior.

 Their Messiah would start “knocking heads” and sending the Romans packing. John himself might have had that expectation as well being the zealot that he was. Certainly as the Christian message went out with Paul many in the **Greek** world were offended by the idea that any God would choose to leave heaven to die a gruesome death. Why, that was just **not** what an Olympian god would do!

 Today, many are offended and have rejected belief in Jesus as their savior because they likewise cannot figure him out. As such they mock believers and try to convince us that our faith is vain, downright silly. They try to punch holes and doubts into the Gospel story such as pointing out **apparent** inconsistencies. (Fortunately there are more than a few books written for laymen which provide answers for such apparent inconsistencies; just one such is, "*Answer me This*!".)

 Among the reasons is that Jesus doesn't treat people equally. He had only twelve apostles, not 12 billion. That just doesn't seem fair; we don't have the same access to power that others do or did, especially the 12 Apostles.

 This of course forgets that heaven is a kingdom not a democracy. There are 9 choirs of angels, not just one. All have different jobs. Within America not everyone is in Congress; folks have different jobs in society. Even our own bodies show that distinction and hierachies are necessary. We need a brain and heart but also toenails.

 Among other reasons doubters give is that there simply is too much human suffering in the world. Jesus should have made paradise here on earth while he was around the first time!

 The vanity of their intellects does not allow them to believe in something beyond their ability to comprehend, their ability to understand. They, of course, miss the point that if anyone ever **could** “figure out” Jesus, then that person would be able, as we say, to “work around Jesus”, and thus control Him. This by definition is not possible. How can an Almighty God be “controlled”?

 More to the point though is that the suffering in this world is not God's fault. In Eden there was no suffering and no reported earthquakes. Ultimately almost all suffering short of floods, blights, pathogens, is due to human sin somewhere.

 But God makes use of suffering to bring good. It may serve as a wakeup call to the sufferer that he or she has been ignoring a problem (or God) too long and the time for change has arrived; it can serve to make a good Christian an ever stronger one, or it may serve another purpose such as bringing someone around the sufferer to Jesus.

 Whether ancient or modern though, the problem, the offense, that many people today have with Jesus is twofold**:** first, that unlike a politician he is not visible or otherwise discernible with any of our five senses. We moderns do not like to trust that which can not be discerned. That is too much like superstition! (Although we see to enjoy politicians who have... "charisma".)

 Secondly, many also believe that Jesus just does not behave as a savior would, just as the Pharisees did. The Pharisees and other leaders were **positive** that the Messiah would be Israel's champion. The Greeks were certain that any important god would always be **untouchable and** unknowable, as with Allah in Islam. Moderns want a God who fits their **personal** understanding of or experience with the universe. One who affirms their personal brilliance.

 Jesus' retort to John's disciples applies to all who want a savior who fits their image. “Look what I am doing!”, he essentially told John's disciples. "**Yes**, the forces of evil are not being beaten back by irresistible force, that is reserved for my Second Coming when I will **not** arrive in swaddling clothes as the First time. Instead, the forces of darkness are being beaten back by...inexplicable love. Satan and his forces, have no weapon in their arsenal to counter love.”

 While particularly true for the clergy, **all** Christians, especially those who are soldiers of the cross through Confirmation, have a duty to help **prepare** the way for the Lord's Second Coming, whether it is this afternoon during half-time or in 4,000 years. While pastors have the pulpit, laity have the everyday whole , world.

 One does not have to “witness” dramatically on a street corner soapbox to help prepare the way of the Lord, although some have that gift. Rather, in ones words and deeds and especially in ones PEACE each believer can exude confidence at home and **at work** that there is a better life after this evil world. Thus, without even mentioning Jesus one can convey belief that there is a savior, and yes, since you asked, his name is called Jesus.

 If challenged that Jesus just does not “fit the image of savior” , one can first ask how they envision a savior to be? Chances are their savior will sound pretty human and awfully **petty**, not unlike the Greek gods who drank too much, flew into rages or lusted after human women. Then we can tell them our "view".

 Just because Jesus acted differently than **we** or anyone around us would does not mean anything frankly. All human societies suffer a certain tunnel vision in believing that their way of doing things or their view of the world is best. Every generation thinks it knows best. It is called: presentism. But beyond our own parochial nature we need always also to remember that Jesus was not just human but Divine as well.

 So yes, Jesus acted differently that we would have. Differently than anyone we know or can think of. Is that not good? Do we not prefer to have as our savior someone who **can** be touched, unlike Allah or a Greek God? Someone who seeks peace and harmony and not violence, like the Pharisee's Messiah? Someone who is more forgiving than we are? Someone who gives second, third, fourth chances, and even seventy times seven? Viewed this way none should be offended by Jesus. Rather, instead, all these are reasons for *Gaudete,* for rejoicing. A-men. +