

Isaiah 11: 1-10
Psalm 72: 1-7
Romans 15: 4-13
St. Matthew 3: 1-12

Advent II 2022.

“Bear fruit worthy of repentance.”

St. Matthew 3: 8a

There are many wonderful things which Jesus Christ taught. For example, teachings from the Sermon on the Mount have been the foundation of the legal system in Britain, the United States and Canada. The Golden Rule is famous, even among many who would not identify themselves as Christians: “So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do so to them; for this is the law and the prophets.”

But Jesus also clearly expressed that he identifies himself closely with God himself – that he is divine. For example, “The Father and I are one.” (John 10: 30) and “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3: 16) It’s not enough simply to believe that Jesus is a nice guy (although he certainly was). We are called to bow our hearts before him, as our Saviour and our Lord...

The Christian writer C. S. Lewis wrote *Mere Christianity* – a defense about why it’s good to follow Christ. Within the book is a famous quote which is called the “poached egg” argument. It’s easy to see why Lewis’ point got this name:

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about [Christ]: I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.

We are all confronted – challenged – by the gospel of Jesus Christ, and this challenge demands a response from us all... We can choose to try to ignore the Hound of Heaven nipping at our heels, and lead our own self-centred lives. Or, we can choose to dare to believe: To surrender all our hurts and pains and dreary human ambitions, and to dare to believe Jesus Christ is our Saviour and Lord. However, the option is *not* open to us “to pick and to choose:” “I will follow Christ on Sunday mornings, but want to keep the rest of the week to myself.” In the words of the beautiful old hymn,

Take my will, and make it thine; it shall be no longer mine.
Take my heart, it is thine own; it shall be thy royal throne.

Take my love: My Lord, I pour at thy feet its treasure store;
Take myself, and I will be, ever, only, all for thee.

We're truly free when we surrender all of ourselves to Jesus Christ...

Now, in this season of Advent, we're encouraged not to be slowpokes in responding to the gospel. No – let's not just mumble to ourselves, "I should attend Church some Sunday morning." Rather, with firmness and conviction, we choose: "I will come, *this coming Sunday*, and I will leave the house at such-and-such a time, to be there on time." Believe me, the first time we make this choice, it will seem that hell itself is conspiring against us from following through our convictions: We're overtired; it's raining; maybe I should just put this off for a Sunday or two... No; don't put it off. "Now is the acceptable time." "Now is the Day of Salvation..."

John the Baptist is presenting this same kind of need for immediate action as he preached by the Jordan River. A tree can grow for decades, but then... "Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown in the fire." When the axe-head is actually resting at the base of the tree; its end is immanent. In the same way, we are called to turn to the Lord *now*...

John the Baptist particularly warns his listeners who think their social status will exempt them from God's wrath at their sin:

Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. (vv. 8-9)

So, we see that we are called to respond to the sharp, beautiful claim which God has put on our lives, through Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit. We are not supposed to hesitate or to delay – but to respond with firmness and conviction.

What exactly is God calling us to *do*? More specifically, what is the first step?...

Today's gospel reading is from the opening pages of Matthew. Today, we read the message of John the Baptist, in our journey toward Christmas: "Bear fruit worthy of repentance..." We are called to repent – that is, to choose to leave behind all our petty vanities and shadows, all our sins and our bad habits, and to make a radical course correction in our lives, to be oriented toward Jesus Christ, just like a compass points unerringly at the magnetic pole...

This re-orientation is not simply by human effort – it is a gift of grace. That is, God won't do it without us; but *we* can't do it without his help. God is our quiet partner, encouraging us; loving us; challenging us when we start to look away to the left or to the right; bringing us to the perfect place of safety in the midst of his wide-open arms (as it were). That is, God is constantly helping us when we're moving in the right direction. We have free will. We need to choose what is good and beautiful and true. But he will see us through...

We're at the beginning of a new Church year; this season of Advent. So, it's no accident that we begin anew this spiritual journey with being confronted by the gospel, and our need for radical repentance. Let's not skip over the deep self-examination that we need to make, in the light of Christ's love. Let's appreciate what we have done right. Let's admit what we have done wrong, and with God's help, become more and more the adopted sons and daughters of God that you and I are called to be.

Thanks be to God.