

WITNESSING TO THE LIGHT - JOY

Advent 3 Year B

Is. 61:1-4, 8-11; Ps. 126; 1 Thes. 5:16-24; Jn. 1:6-8, 19-28

Tannum 13/12/2020

A Sunday school teacher once asked the children in her class:

“If I sold my house and my car, had a big garage sale and gave all my money to the church, would that get me into Heaven?” she asked the children in her Sunday school class.

“No!” the children all answered.

“If I cleaned the church every day, mowed the yard, and kept everything neat and tidy, would that get me into Heaven?”

Again, the answer was, “No!”

“Well, then, if I was kind to animals and gave lollies to all the children, and loved my neighbour, would that get me into Heaven?” she asked them again.

Again, they all answered, “No!”

“Well,” she continued, “then how can I get into Heaven?”

One insightful five-year-old boy shouted out, “You gotta be dead!”

As we journey through this season of Advent, just like the period of Lent, held before the celebration of Easter, we’re encouraged think about such things as salvation and mission. We’re encouraged to think about our own status before God and how we share with others the life of Christ in us—as the imperative of the gospel message defines the kind of journey we take towards these major celebrations of the church.

Unfortunately many people seem to define salvation in terms of “Getting into heaven.” I am reminded of the teacher of the Law who, late one night, asked Jesus, “What must I do to be saved?” That kind of thinking leads us to see mission as getting as many people into heaven as we can. That then causes us to ask questions like “Who will be saved?” Or “Who will be in heaven?” And underneath it all is the little boy’s assumption that the single prerequisite for salvation and heaven is death.

Along come Isaiah and John. Isaiah, as you know, was a prophet, sent by God to declare the mind of God to the people—to call them out of their complacency and idolatry, and back to God. John, in today's gospel reading is "a man sent from God" who came "as a witness." Both Isaiah and John have something to say about salvation. And what they both seem to be saying is that salvation is not about some kind of "pie in the sky when you die, in the sweet bye-and-bye." It's not about another place or another time to which we aspire. Rather, both Isaiah and John announce that salvation is (or at least ought to be) the reality of this world as it should be—now.

The passage from the book of Isaiah as it appears in the lectionary today, picks up on the language of comfort found in Isaiah 40 which was the Old Testament reading for last week. It expands the images of comfort, reward, and restoration and builds into it the concept of Joy—the Joy of our salvation—the theme for the third Sunday of Advent—today:

*I will greatly rejoice in the Lord,
my whole being shall exult in my God;
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness... (Isaiah 61:10)*

This is a word of promise on the part of God to bring salvation, that is healing and wholeness to the land. The season of Advent is understood to be a season of waiting. The word that keeps coming is "be patient." God will be faithful. God will pour out favour on the land. To returning exiles there is a mixture of feelings. There is relief at their liberation, but also a sense of concern about the ruined landscape that they find upon their return. The prophet tells them not to worry, salvation will come.

Isaiah offers us a vision of just what salvation looks like: We are to turn our attention to those named as recipients of God's Good News—the poor, the oppressed, the brokenhearted, captives, prisoners, the mournful, and the faint of spirit. Our mission to, with, and among them, defines God's people as those people who exist for the sake of others. Salvation is not just about what you believe, but what you do with what you believe.

Isaiah also tells us that we will know we are involved in God's saving mission work when others, that is, "the nations of the world," notice that God's people—that you and I—live differently—that is, we live for God and we live for others. Earlier in Isaiah 49:6,

Isaiah says, *“I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.”*

In the first chapter of the Gospel according to John (which, of course is John the Evangelist, not John the Baptist) it’s interesting to note that the other “John” is not named “John the baptizer” as he is in Mark, or “John the Baptist” as he is in Matthew, or even “John the son of Zechariah” as we find in Luke. In this account, John is simply “a man sent from God ... as a witness to testify to the Light.”

The Light, of which John speaks, of course, is “the Word” or “the Logos” of John 1:1, which has been with God and is God since before creation, and as it says right at the beginning of John, through Him “all things were made and without him was not anything made that was made.” This same Word or Light, we are told, “became flesh and dwelt among us”—literally, “pitched his tent among us”. In other words, he became one of us.

As God’s Word, God’s Light grew up and lived in our midst, he would one day read Isaiah chapter 61 in his hometown synagogue and declare, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” That is: it’s now time to begin living out the vision of salvation and mission that Isaiah proclaimed. It’s time for salvation as the reality of this world as it should be! It’s this vision of salvation and mission to which John was sent to witness. John is a witness; in Greek he is a *martyria* (μαρτυρία), from which we get the word “martyr.” Witnesses say what they have seen or heard or attest to the truth of another’s testimony—sometimes in the face of persecution and even death.

This man, John, who has been sent from God, presents Christ as, “The true light that enlightens every man.” (Jn. 1:9) John admits that he was not the light. Rather, he was a witness to the light—the one sent by God to “to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe.”

John’s role, given to him by God, was to recognize this true Light that has come into the world—a light that the darkness could not overcome—and to call attention to this Light so that others might recognize it and believe. This in turn means that we are to commit ourselves to the kind of salvation and mission that Isaiah proclaims, that John recognizes, and that Jesus lives, and that both John and Jesus call us to follow so that our lives might become “a light to the nations.”

John didn’t come to prepare everyone and everything for Christmas. John didn’t come to announce the beginning of the Christmas sale season. He didn’t come to stir us into a

frenzy of shopping and spending. Rather, he came to remind us and to bear witness to all who will listen, that the darkest forces of the world are not as powerful as they claim or appear to be—that Christ brings the light that enlivens every person who will listen and respond—that the salvation we seek is not just for some far-off time and place—when we’re dead—but something to be lived, here and now.

As we celebrate this third Sunday in Advent—the Sunday of Joy—and hear the call on John’s life to witness to the Light that has come into the world—let’s pray that we also might become more like John in our own life and ministry. For that is what we have been called to be—men and women sent from God as witnesses to testify to the Light, so that all might believe through him.

This Light of God is something we have *all* received at one point or another—it’s what makes us true believers. Although we probably don’t fully understand precisely how it came to us, we know that it came through the intermediary of people who spoke to us of God and of his Church—our parents, our friends, our teachers, etc. The light of Christ found witnesses for itself, just like John the Baptist, in order that we, today, might also be faithful witnesses to the Light, which shines upon every person.

Advent has a way of tempering expectations (at least in principle). There is this now/not yet sense of reality. We see signs of change, but not its fullness. We will have to wait for the coming of the Kingdom of God in its fullness, to see the full flowering of justice and peace in the land. But, when that happens, praise will spring up from the nations. While the message of Advent is a counsel of patience, that doesn’t mean we don’t have work to do

As it says in John, the Light is “life, and the life was the light of all people.” People look to us in order to see the Light. When all that we say and all that we do bears witness to the Light, heaven and salvation will be understood not as a time and place after death, but rather the world as it should be, here and now. As we journey ever closer to the celebration of Christ’s birth at Christmas, may Christ himself, teach us to be true witnesses to the true Light of God, so that we might accomplish the will of God in our own lives and carry on Christ’s Mission in the world.

To Christ our Saviour, the Light of all life, be all the glory, honour and praise. Amen.¹

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