

John and Jesus: A Graceful Parting

Evensong Service at Advent

Psalm 114-115; Isaiah 5: 1-7; II Peter 3: 11-18; Luke 7: 28-35

Richard A. Rhem
St. John's Episcopal Church
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Prepared text of the sermon

I have a double reason for being grateful to St. John's parish and the Rector, Father Jared, for this invitation to bring the meditation this evening. The first reason being that this is a breakthrough for me. It was the Spring of 2004. My retirement from Christ Community was imminent. Our financial counselor from New Jersey made a call. We were looking at how things financial would work out. I could see anxiety on Nancy's face, obviously wondering if we could survive. At one point I said to her, "Don't worry, honey. I will be invited to preach often in area churches and that will supplement our retirement funds."

When I related that incident to my people at Christ Community, they laughed out loud. They knew, as did I, that no one would touch me with a ten-foot pole and that has proved to be true. Being new in town and being young and courageous, Father Jared has given me the first such invitation in six and a half years. So you see, this is a breakthrough for me and I'm grateful to him for taking the risk.

But, more seriously, there is a second reason I'm grateful for this opportunity; it has forced me to take up again the theme of the Advent Season and experience in depth the beginning of the new church year. I was raised and educated in the Reformed tradition which, for all its positive dimensions, never succeeded in holding on to or recapturing the rich tradition of Catholic, sacramental worship. In fact it was a badge of honor that such rich, liturgical worship with all the symbolism and, of course, the observance of the church year was left behind in favor of "the pure preaching of the Word" as guided by the catechism.

Over the years, the observance of the seasons of the church year became more and more meaningful to me personally and, I believe, to the people I served as well. The Christian calendar was the framework within which our existence found meaning, being filled with meaning far beyond the simple marking of the calendar per se. And Advent is the beginning, a new year in which once again we will journey together as a people through the events that mark the story of Jesus, the story of Immanuel – God with us.

That is where we find ourselves this evening; it is Advent once again. The word itself means “coming.” Thus the theme – the One who came will come again. I went back over the themes of my Advent preaching over the years. That confirmed that of which I was aware; I had over the years developed a problem with that proclamation.

Earlier in my ministry I had lived by the traditional orthodox Christian story – God was history’s sovereign. God created, God’s providence guided the unfolding creation and God would bring all things to their consummation. Jesus the Savior was born, crucified, raised from the dead, ascended to the throne of God from whence He would come in judgment and grace to judge and to redeem after which He would hand over the Kingdom to the Father and God would be all in all.

In various ways and for various reasons that straightforward scheme of things began to unravel for me. I smile as I look over those old Advent sermon themes. For example, Advent, 1984: the confident proclamation – “The King Is Coming”; but a few years later – Advent, 1992, my sermon title for the first Sunday in Advent was “Do You Really Think He Is Going to Come?” My texts were from Acts 3 and Revelation 22. The Acts 3 passage may be the most primitive Christology in the New Testament. Peter addresses the crowd after enabling a lame man to walk and concludes with a call to repentance and faith in Jesus as the Messiah:

Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out, so the times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Messiah appointed for you, that is, Jesus, who must remain in heaven until the time of universal restoration that God announced long ago through his holy prophets.

(Acts 3: 19-21)

Here you have one ancient witness who paints a picture of Jesus, who is presented in the opening of Acts as ascending to the Father, now on the verge of returning to effect a universal restoration – the fulfilled Kingdom of God.

One can hardly miss the urgency as well as the sense that this would be a literal return to the earthly scene and a literal effecting of the reign of God.

The text from Revelation 22 is entitled in my NRSV “Epilogue and Benediction” and the visionary, John, records the voice that addresses him at the close of the vision. The voice is the ascended Jesus who declares: “See, I am coming soon... (Revelation 22:12).

I do believe that was the confident hope of many followers of Jesus who were called Followers of The Way. There has been a serious scholarly discussion on the question of whether or not Jesus believed himself to be the Messiah as well as a sharp disagreement among New Testament scholars as to whether or not Jesus

was part of the widespread apocalyptic mood that prevailed in his day. The debate continues and, as is the case with most such questions of the historical Jesus research, probably cannot be definitively answered.

But no matter, for it seems clear to me, whether Jesus bought into the apocalyptic mind-set and expectation, his early followers did. And further, for all the symbolism in which that expectation of the end was clothed, I do think there was an expectation of a literal return of the reigning Christ at God's right hand and an end of history as we know it. That has always been the case with a part of the Christian Church and continues such to our time.

It was that literal interpretation of a "second coming" that I was beginning to question. Thus it was that finally I felt I must be honest with my people and acknowledge that such a scenario was no longer compelling for me. I broke the news very carefully. I simply said, "Jesus isn't coming again."

Well you have to be pretty confident of your people to be that straightforward but that was the way we were. I do remember coming home for Sunday dinner only to be met by Nancy who said to me, "You don't know everything!" But she did give me dinner. And our financial advisor to whom I referred earlier was listening to a tape of the sermon and reported that he was so shocked he almost ran off the New Jersey Turnpike!

Obviously I did not make that announcement and leave it. I went on to relate how, just as we had come to see the early chapters of Genesis as mythical stories of the beginning, just so I was coming to understand the highly symbolic stories and images of the End, not as literal portrayals of what is yet to be but, rather, mythical stories that affirmed that the End would be the triumph of Grace – that the God of the Beginning would be the God of the End – the God who in the present was present with us. This is how I ended that sermon:

In the Beginning – God
In the End – God
In the meantime – God,
the God whose heart is laid bare in the life of Jesus.
Where is history going?
I don't know.
What will happen to planet Earth?
I don't know.
I only trust my life and yours,
those I've loved and lost awhile,
my children and my children's children,
are grasped in the grasp of Love that
will never fail –
here, now and beyond. –
That is enough.

The theme of hope found expression in a number of Advent sermons in subsequent years. In 1995 the series of sermons for Advent was entitled “Now – But Then.” For Advent III the sermon subject was “Can We Be Truthful and Hopeful?” The sermon ended thus:

...To know Emmanuel is to know that God is with us, God is with us here and now; God is with us in the darkness; God is with us in our health and God is with us in our dying. God is with us in our loving and caring. God, here and now! That’s the content of Christian hope...God is in this process of which we are a part, embraces it all and goes through it all with us and gives us that amazing capacity in the darkness to live as though the Light is about to dawn. Hope, hope doesn’t come from experience. Experience shatters hope! Hope comes from God, and it is hope in God and it is the experience of the presence of God, here in the darkness where we dwell in the land of the shadow of death. Advent calls us to think about the end, but not the year 2000 or 3000 or 10,000. It calls us to speak about the end of life, the purpose of life, the meaning of life, which is God with us. God with us.

Why do we keep on hoping? That, to me, is an amazing thing. After all these years, we keep on hoping. After all of the wars, after all of the death and disease, after all of the brokenness, we keep on hoping. To me, it is the best sign I know that the hope stems from God, Who says to us there is no darkness so dark, there is no coldness so cold, there is no storm so severe, but what I will be with you, I will keep you, I will never let you go. That is Advent hope. It is the present appropriation of a future consummation. Hope teamed with faith keep us moving toward love, which is at the heart of all things. I believe that, and in that, I hope. And in that hope, the darkness is scattered and the light dawns, because God is with us in the meantime. If we don’t feel for something more, we’ll fall for something less. If we don’t reach for something above us, we’ll fall for something below us. It is in the gift of hope that the present is transformed. And I can say in regard to now and then, all is well. All is well.

It is because each recurring Advent brings with it that strong affirmation of hope that it is so invigorating to enter once again into this season and know one is beginning anew the passage through the story of Jesus. In the 1995 sermon referred to above I began with a statement from the Church of England entitled “Christian Believing:”

Christian life is an adventure, a voyage of discovery, a journey, sustained by faith and hope toward a final and complete communion with love at the heart of things.

That became for me the perspective with which I enter each new Advent Season.

But the New Testament readings for this evening add another central Advent theme – the call to prepare for the coming of the Lord. Again, traditionally, this had to do with the conviction that history was nearing its end and the Judge of all the earth would soon appear. This evening’s Epistle lesson from the second letter of Peter follows up on the reading for Advent I – II Peter 3: 1-10. I smile as I read that passage because obviously there were those already when this Epistle was written who doubted that Jesus would return. This, in fact, is the central thrust of II Peter – deny the imminent coming of the Lord to your peril and, further, because He will come in God’s good time, one must be ready –

Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of persons ought you to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God...

This call to moral seriousness calls to mind the ministry of John the Baptist who is the subject of the Gospel reading from Luke 7. The birth of John and the prophecies spoken over him are recorded in Luke’s Gospel in connection with the birth of Jesus. Mark’s Gospel introduces John the Baptist with a quote from, he says, Isaiah:

See I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
Who will prepare your way;
The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

The “messenger” reference is from Malachi, not Isaiah, and the reference there is to the re-appearance of the fiery prophet Elijah. The first three Gospels have shaped the most familiar rendering of the story line – John the Baptist carries on a movement of religious reform in the nature of apocalypticism that was in the air at that time. The End was approaching, God’s judgment was near, John’s call was to repentance with the washing of baptism as the ritual sign. Then Jesus appears and is baptized by John and receives his call to ministry as the heavens open and the Spirit as a dove falls upon him. From thence the Gospels relate the ministry of Jesus, noting John had been thrown in prison for daring to tell King Herod he could not have Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, as his own. John’s integrity got him imprisoned and ultimately beheaded.

If we go to the Gospel of John we learn an interesting piece of data not reported in the first three Gospels. The fourth Gospel is not generally thought of as giving an historically accurate account of Jesus’ ministry but a good case can be made for John’s note that Jesus began a ministry in Judea. In John 4: 1-3 we read,

Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, ‘Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John, – although it was not Jesus

himself but his disciples who baptized – he left Judea and started back to Galilee.

There is no mention of this in the other Gospels; Matthew and Mark simply say when John was put in prison Jesus left to begin his ministry in Galilee. Luke doesn't mention John's imprisonment but, following the narrative of the Temptation in the Wilderness, Luke has Jesus appearing at his hometown synagogue in Nazareth where he was invited to read the Scripture – a passage from Isaiah –

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, 'Is not this Joseph's son?'

Why do I make note of this? Note how the Isaiah passage is full of good news; it is Gospel! And Jesus, in Luke's rendering, announces Isaiah's vision of a day of grace as being fulfilled in his own ministry.

And there is a fascinating omission from the Isaiah reading. If one goes to Isaiah 61:1-2 one finds in Luke that either Luke or, if he accurately portrays the scene, Jesus, omits the last line of the citation. In Luke Jesus concludes the reading "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." If you turn to the Isaiah passage, those words are followed by "and the day of vengeance of our God."

Could that be just an oversight? Maybe, but I suspect that by Jesus or by Luke it is an intentional omission. Why do I claim that? Because I see Luke portraying Jesus as inaugurating a ministry of grace – not a day of vengeance, of fiery judgment as had marked the ministry of John the Baptist.

Jesus' move from Judea to Galilee was not simply a change in geography; it was a change in his whole ministry – its tone, its thrust, its whole proclamation. Jesus had been baptized by John the Baptist. He obviously began his ministry under John's influence and in the manner of John whose model was the prophet Elijah of Malachi 3:

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to the temple...
But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?
(Malachi 3: 1-2)

The coming one would bring judgment – a refiner and purifier. Such a ministry found fulfillment in the ministry of John the Baptist and that is where Jesus began.

I mentioned above that only John's Gospel tells of the early Judean ministry of Jesus. John's Gospel also places Jesus' cleansing of the temple during that early period rather than during Holy Week as do the other three Gospels. If John's Gospel is correct in the early placement of that incident it would fit well with the nature of Jesus' early ministry under the influence of John the Baptist. Then to juxtapose such a scene with his declaration in Nazareth – to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord, omitting the day of vengeance of our God, we can see an entirely new spirit and ministry in Jesus.

Meanwhile John the Baptist is in prison. He had the highest hopes for Jesus' ministry. He saw Jesus as the return of Elijah, the precursor of the End. John so longed for the intervention of God, the day of judgment on the wicked and the salvation of God's people. John could bear his imprisonment because in Jesus he could feel the approach of the End and the consummation of all the promises of God.

But then his followers visiting him in prison brought back stories of Jesus' Galilean ministry – a ministry of grace not judgment, of healing, of joy, of open table fellowship. And John wondered. He said, "That's not in the program. That's not exactly the agenda I had set for Jesus. I thought by now the heavens would have opened and the wrath of God poured out, and all I hear about are blind people seeing and deaf people hearing and people dancing, singing, celebrating the grace of God!" And finally, he couldn't stand it any more and he sent the followers with this question full of anguish: "Are you the one, or do I have to look for another?" And the translation of that question could be as well, "Or must I look for another kind of Messiah?" In other words, the question that John put to Jesus was, "Did I miss it? Did I get it wrong?"

John's question to Jesus through John's disciples is what is behind this evening's Gospel reading. John's question made Jesus address the dramatic change in his ministry in Galilee as opposed to his early ministry in Judea under John's influence.

Can you imagine the anguish? John was a good man. John was serious. John was passionate. John's whole life and ministry was at stake, in the answer to that

question. John came to the end of his days entertaining the possibility that he might have gotten it wrong. Jesus is never defensive. Did you ever notice that in the Gospels? Jesus is never defensive. He didn't answer directly, only indirectly. He said to the followers of John, "Look around. See what's happening? See the good things that are happening? Go tell John what you're experiencing here." But, of course, behind that indirect answer was the obvious direct answer. "John, I'm not the one you hoped I would be. John, I can't paint from Malachi's palette, for in my own struggle to find my own vision and to gain my own voice, I hear another song. I heard the song of the suffering servant. I heard Isaiah's record of that one who spoke of one who would not crush the broken reed or snuff out the smoldering wick. John, I can't do it your way. I have to do it according to the vision that compels me. I've got to proclaim a grace that is grander than anything you ever dreamed of. I understand, John, you've run out of patience, but the God who has gripped me never runs out of patience. I understand, John, your dis-ease with all that you see about us, but I drink at the fountain of a God who will never abandon us, who'll stay by creation and walk with us and never let us go."

Jesus affirmed John. He didn't make a big point of saying John was wrong. In fact, it would seem that Jesus was ready to acknowledge that John had fulfilled the role that he had to fulfill. John was a prophet, the greatest of the prophets, but something new had dawned and Jesus was called to inaugurate a new vision of the Kingdom of God. Jesus is clear:

I tell you, among those born of women no one is greater than John; yet the least in the Kingdom of God is greater than he. (Luke 7: 28)

I call that a gracious parting. Would that, in the history of the Church, there had been more gracious partings and less brokenness, bitterness and even too often war.

John and Jesus – a gracious movement away by Jesus because John's hope for the end with the fire of judgment on the earth, destroying those beyond the covenant fold was for Jesus a hope too narrow; his vision would not be realized until the arms of God's love were wrapped around the whole human family. For Jesus there was being inaugurated a Kingdom of Grace to which all God's children were invited.

Advent 2010 and we find ourselves in an emerging cosmic reality neither John nor Jesus could have dreamed of. And, for many of us, this Advent we are not looking for the end of human history at some future date, be it a decade, a century or a millennium. Rather than God "up there," "out there," we may sense God as the creative Love at the center of things beckoning us as the cosmos evolves to give human shape to that love, thus living in the communion of Love, trusting, as was true for Jesus, there is a bigger picture than we've yet dreamed of, a Grace we can hardly conceive of. In a word, a future beyond our wildest dreams.

That being the case, John the Baptist, echoed by the writer of the second Epistle of Peter, might ask –

What sort of persons ought we to be?

Advent, full of hope, is a time of reflection on our lives to be sure we are walking in love, full of grace and compassion, being and doing what we can to live, already, love's fullest expression.