

## **STEWARDS OF THE MYSTERIES OF GOD**

On the Second Sunday of Advent the focus of the Lessons and Collect was on Holy Scripture, and more specifically on what St. Paul described as “the things that were written aforetime” for our instruction and edification, namely, the writings of what we now call the Old Testament. Today the focus shifts from the ancient writings to the living voice of John the Baptist, crying in the wilderness, “Prepare ye the way of the Lord.” No reed shaken in the wind was he, no softy in fine raiment. He was rather a prophet whose clarion call arrested attention, demanded justice, repentance and a turning of one’s face to await Messiah.

St. Paul in today’s Epistle was similarly oriented to the future, but to Christ’s second coming rather than the first. Paul knew himself to be a minister of Christ, a steward of the mysteries of God, who must carry on his work in the knowledge that the only judgment that matters is that which will take place at the coming of the Lord who will bring to light the hidden things of darkness and make manifest the counsels of the heart.

It is the office of both the Baptizer and the Apostle to make us fix our eyes on the coming of Christ, whose birth we will soon celebrate and whose coming again in glory we most ardently expect. Advent has this Janus-like quality—looking back at the first coming of Christ and forward to his second. The Collect of the Day rightly fixes our attention on both.

I want to focus this morning, however, not on John, who while the greatest of the prophets was least in the Kingdom of God, because, for all of his importance, he still belonged to the old, not the new, to the age of preparation, not that of realization, awaiting the coming of the Kingdom of God, but not yet belonging to it. The Kingdom our Lord came to bring about through his life and teaching, his death and resurrection, was a new thing, the fulfillment of ancient prophecy. As St. John has it, “The law came through Moses; grace and truth through Jesus Christ.” Or the Epistle to the Hebrews, “In many and various way, God spake in the past, but in these last days by his Son, the express image of his glory.” Jesus Christ is the eternal Word of God become flesh. Said

St. John of the Cross, “By giving us, as he did, his Son, his only Word, [God] has in that one Word said everything. There is no need for any further revelation.”<sup>1</sup>

This new and final revelation of God in Christ is spoken by St. Paul as the mystery of God, or, in its several aspects, as the mysteries of God. By ‘mystery’ Paul does not mean a who-done-it, except in the sense that a mystery novel gives in the course of its development various indications or hints of the final discovery which is not revealed until the end. For St. Paul, the mystery of God is that purpose of God which was hidden in times past until it was revealed in Christ. He wrote to the Corinthians a chapter and a half before today’s Epistle, “But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glorification. None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (I Cor.2:7-8). In the final doxology which concludes his Epistle to the Romans, that letter which most systematically traces the unfolding of the plan of God for Jew and Gentile, Paul wrote, “Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed . . . to the only wise God, be glory for evermore through Jesus Christ! Amen.” (Rom. 16:25-27).

It is in his Epistle to the Ephesians, a later work, however, that he sets forth most fully his understanding of the mystery of God. He writes in chapter one, “For [God] has made known to us in all wisdom and insight *the mystery of his will*, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, *to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth*” (Eph. 1:9-10). In the second chapter of Ephesians Paul tells how God in Christ reconciled Gentile with Jew, so that “Now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility” (Eph. 2:13-14). (Now this gives real meaning to the message of the Christmas angels, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace, good will toward men.”) In chapter three he speaks yet more directly of “the stewardship of God’s grace” that was given to him, “how the mystery was made known to [him] by revelation,” that “the

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<sup>1</sup> From a treatise on *The Ascent of Mount Carmel (The Liturgy of the Hours; Vol. I: Advent-Christmas*, p. 212.

Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (Eph. 1-6, see ff.). All of this leads up to his well-known plea at the beginning of chapter four for his readers to live up to their calling, “forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace, [for] there is *one* body and *one* spirit, . . . *one* Lord, *one* faith, *one* baptism, *one* God and Father of us *all*, who is above *all* and through *all* and in *all*” (Eph. 4:1-6). (That’s ten unitive words in a row!)

Now this long aside, and it was not really an aside, imparts greater meaning to today’s Epistle, where St. Paul says quite pointedly that the apostles and their associates should be regarded as “servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God” (I Cor. 4:1). With the light that is shed on his thinking by our brief visit to the Epistle to the Ephesians we may have a better understanding of why he uses this terminology here. The Christians at Corinth, as you know, were deeply and sadly divided into cliques, each with a slogan, “I belong to Paul,” “I belong to Apollos,” “I belong to Cephas,” and some, naturally, “I belong to Christ,” to which St. Paul responds, “Is Christ divided?” (I Cor. 1:12-13). What is this? he asks. Each of us ministers of Christ has his valued work, his proper part in the overall promulgation of the gospel. “I planted, Apollos watered, but it is God that gives the increase” (3:5). We are all God’s fellow-workers (3:9). This then is what he means when he says, “Let a man so account of us, as the ministers of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God” (4:1).

Decades later St. Clement of Rome will write to that very same church of Corinth, addressing as his first concern their “quarrels,” “the abominable and unholy schism, so alien and foreign to those whom God has chosen” (Clement’s First Letter to the Corinthians 1:1). Later in that Epistle he asks, “Why is it that you harbor strife, bad temper, dissension, schism, and quarreling? Do we not have one God, one Christ, one Spirit of grace which was poured out for us? And is there not one calling in Christ? Why do we rend and tear asunder Christ’s members and raise a revolt against our own body? Why do we reach such a pitch of insanity that we are oblivious of the fact that we are members of each other?” (46:5-7).

Now all of this has, I fear, an amazingly contemporary ring. Christians are still divided—tragically so—and I am not speaking here of those who have separated

themselves from the faith and practice of the Church, but of those who would be faithful to Christ. It is so easy for us to mistake our particular understanding of the truth of Christ for *the* truth of Christ, and to set ourselves against, or at least apart from, those who do not see everything exactly as we do. Read the New Testament. Is there not a distinct difference in the way St. Paul understood the faith, his particular framework being determined in part by his rabbinic training at the feet of Gamaliel, from that of St. Peter, determined in large measure by his physical presence in the company of Jesus during his earthly ministry? Is not St. Matthew's approach quite different from that of St. Luke, and that of St. Mark from our blessed St. John? Yet all embraced the true faith; all served the same Lord, whose truth as the eternal Word of God, who was with God in the beginning, through whom all things came to be, who was made flesh and revealed the fullness of the mystery of God, transcended all their partial grasps of the same. All of them grasped the divine reality truly; none comprehended it fully. Is not our understanding of the divine revelation greatly enhanced by each one? Which of them would we choose to do without? Whichever we chose, we would be the poorer, . . . and unfaithful to the Church, the pillar and ground of truth, who, guided into all truth by the promised Spirit, transmitted all their writings to us as Holy Scripture. God's truth is fully revealed in Christ. An eternity will not suffice for us to plumb its depths.

Surely it is well that St. Paul should speak of the responsibility shared by himself, St. Peter, Apollos and others as being "stewards of the mysteries of God," entrusted with the fullness of God's revealed purpose to unite all things in Christ, for the which they would have to give account when the Lord comes to bring to light the hidden things of darkness and make manifest the counsels of the heart (I Cor. 4:5). We live in the midst of this final age between the first coming of our Lord in humility and his second coming in glory, and must bear constantly in mind the full and final aim of the gospel whose stewards we are. *The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* of the Second Vatican Council rightly notes,

The Church, to which we are called in Christ Jesus and in which we acquire holiness through the grace of God, will reach its perfection only in the glory of heaven, when the time comes for the renewal of all things, and the whole world, which is intimately bound up with man and reaches its

perfection through him, will, along with the human race, be perfectly restored in Christ.<sup>2</sup>

Until then we all labor in imperfect churches, see through a glass darkly, grasp eternal truth but partially, and must bear ever in mind both the reality of our lamentable contemporary circumstances and, as we seek to find our way through the present morass, the glorious end we are called to serve.

William Murchison, near the conclusion of his book, *Mortal Follies*, which is a perceptive analysis of the theological and ethical transformation of the Episcopal Church over the last half-century, mentions the “continuing” Anglican churches who, seeking to be faithful, have left the parent church, and notes that these bodies are “likely more successful at providing refuge for the ecclesiastically afflicted than at winning the world for Christ.”<sup>3</sup> Our Lord prayed for the unity of the Church specifically in order that the world might believe in him (Jn. 17). It is important for the moment to provide theological refuge for the ecclesiastically afflicted, but we must do so while continually reminding ourselves that the “faith once delivered to the saints” (Jude 4), of which we speak so often, is none other than the mystery of God revealed in Christ which has as its one and only goal, the reconciliation of all things in Christ. And to that great and final goal, all of our prayers, all of our words and all of our actions must be continually and earnestly devoted. Like John the Baptist and the Apostle Paul, our eyes must be fixed not on the past but on the future, on the coming of Christ. Well do we pray on this day,

O Lord Jesus Christ, who at thy first coming didst send thy messenger to prepare thy way before thee; Grant that the ministers and stewards of thy mysteries may likewise so prepare and make ready thy way, by turning the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, that at thy second coming to judge the world we may be found an acceptable people in thy sight, who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Spirit ever, one God, world without end. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, n. 48.

<sup>3</sup> William Murchison, *Mortal Follies: Episcopalians and the Crisis of Mainline Christianity* (New York: Encounter Books, 2009), pp. 189-190.