

Stirring Things Up

Collect for the Day, Advent 3, Matthew 11:2-11
December 12, 2010

I.

This is your lucky day. Or maybe not. You get to hear a sermon while people at the 10:00 am service will miss out on that opportunity. Our annual Advent Festival of Lessons and Music is on tap for them. Seriously, however, they will have a good program, and if you have free time later this morning I urge you to come back for some familiar Scriptures and wonderful music.

Today is the third Sunday in Advent, which was known in medieval times as *Gaudete* Sunday. It still is referred to in that way in the Roman Catholic church and many Episcopal churches with Anglo-catholic traditions.

That's also why one of our four Advent candles is rose-colored. It's lit today for the first time. This reflects the Latin meaning of *Gaudete*, which is an invitation to rejoice as we draw nearer to that day of celebration of the birth of our Lord and Savior.

But today also has another name from our Anglican past. It's called "Stir-Up Sunday," and it comes from the first line of our Collect of the Day at the beginning of the service. Remember that it said, "Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us."

Some people say that in Old England these words also were an instruction to the cooks to hurry home and stir up the ingredients of their plum puddings and fruitcakes that had been fermenting in their kitchens for weeks. No extra charge for that information.

But back to the Collect. It's important to note here that this Collect does not call on God to stir us up, but to stir himself up. "Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us." Are we sure that's what we want? We don't normally think of God as being stirred up do we? This might be one of those times to think twice about what we ask for.

Suppose, for example you are in a hurry in the morning to get some place, and you go into your kitchen to grab a quick breakfast and be on your way. And suppose the words of the Collect had come true. Jesus was sitting right there at your kitchen table with a nice inviting smile on his face, waiting for you.

What are you going to say? "Hey, Jesus. Good to see you. Wish I had time to talk but I'm running late. We'll visit when I get home later."

Or, we might say, "Hey, Jesus. What a break that you showed up now. Let's go, you can help me with all this stuff I have to get done today."

I would like to think that if we actually encountered Jesus sitting at our kitchen table we would drop everything and give him our undivided attention. And I also would like to think we would focus on his agenda, not ours.

But of course that idea leads to one of the basics of our faith. Jesus already is at our kitchen tables right now, and in our living rooms, and everywhere in our lives wanting us to follow him. And when we neglect his Word or do not attend to him in prayer, we grow apart from him.

And at that point, the second line of today's Collect has meaning. Remember after we asked God to stir himself up, we then prayed that "because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us." That type of prayer, if sincerely and regularly offered, will help us stay closer to our Lord.

II.

Now, you probably know that these Collects are not in the Bible. They're in the Prayer Book. They were written long after the time of Jesus and the Apostles, and some only go back a few hundred years. But they are inspired by the Bible and illuminate its stories.

Today's Collect, for example, illustrates today's Gospel about Jesus and John the Baptist. We heard last week about John's call to repent because the Messiah was coming. Now we fast forward and hear that John had been imprisoned by King Herod and everything had been taken from him. He could not preach, he had no mission, and didn't know what was happening.

In fact, nothing seemed to have changed from John's perspective in prison. The Romans, along with the Pharisees and Sadducees, still were controlling things. And because he was in prison he was not able to know what Jesus had been doing in the world. So it was only natural for him to send a messenger to Jesus asking if he really was the one who is to come.

And Jesus answer was cleverly constructed, wasn't it. He said, "Tell John that the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them."

Think about that in the context of the Collect. This was just another way for Jesus to say, "I'm stirring things up." It was another way for Jesus to say, "With great might I have come among the people, who are sorely hindered by their sins. And through my grace and mercy I help and deliver them." Sounds pretty much like the Collect, doesn't it?

III.

So let's bring this discussion back to today. We began with Jesus sitting at our kitchen table, and we recognized that the routines of our own lives might lead us away from the love and blessings our Lord and Savior has for us. How can we be present and receptive when the Lord through divine power stirs things up?

Perhaps a small case study might help. Let's consider the story of the fellow who pulled up behind another car, and noticed that the car in front had a bumper sticker that said, "Honk, if you love Jesus." You probably have seen them.

So this fellow, thinking he was expressing his faith, laid on the horn. And the driver of the car in front immediately raised his right hand with a contemporary well-known sign of disrespect. At that moment the fellow who honked realized that the light was red.

How do we relate this to placing Christ at the center of all we do? Let's start with the driver who honked his horn without realizing it could be misunderstood. Shouldn't he have been more aware of his circumstances rather than simply reacting? He might have been a little thoughtless in showing his faith.

This applies to us. When we have opportunities to express our faith we certainly want to do it without getting the response he received. We don't want to be misunderstood. That means we let God lead us in our worldly as well as spiritual lives.

And what about the driver of the car in front? He certainly must have forgotten about his bumper sticker and the Christian invitation it extended. By having that bumper sticker he was holding himself out as a Christian example, even if he was stopped at a red light. And in his anger or frustration he did not honor the image he was presenting.

This also applies to us. People know we are Christians and can have expectations that we will conduct ourselves accordingly, even if others approach us in the wrong way or at the wrong time. And that means we are called to reflect Christ's love even when a typical human reaction might be otherwise.

In a larger sense these ideas describe the problems we all encounter when we do not pay attention to how we witness in the world. And these problems occur when there is distance in our relationship with our Lord. One invariably follows the other.

IV.

So, let's bring the themes and ideas of this Third Sunday in Advent together. We asked God to stir up his power and come among us. Recognizing our sinful natures we asked that through his grace and mercy he help and deliver us. We also saw how, when he was among us, Jesus helped and delivered those to whom he ministered.

And while we prayed the words of a Collect originally written by others, we appropriated them to ourselves and made them our own words when we said them here in community. This prayer is no less important just because it originated with someone else.

Hear it again. "Stir up your power, O Lord, and come among us." Implicit in those words is the undertaking that if we ask him to come, we are ready to receive him. We should not be surprised to find him sitting at our kitchen table.

And then, "As we are hindered by our sins let your grace and mercy help us." Implicit here is the recognition that we are imperfect in our lives and our witness, and that only through him can we even hope to live into our Christian identity.

So as we go into our community, and the world, we take with us what is in our hearts. That certainly means we are called to honk if we love Jesus, and to keep on honking unless we see a red light.

At the same time, if we are wearing Jesus' bumper sticker, which we surely do as we daily offer the examples of our lives, we are called to always remember that even the little things we do can be perceived by others as the measure of our faith.

But it only works according to God's will when the Lord is with us, and the Lord is most effectively with us when we ask him to be there. And if we ask, we know in faith that we will receive. *Amen.*