"The Reasonableness of Christianity"

Sermon- Christ Church Quaker Farms, Oxford, CT
Sunday, December 7, 2025
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Isaiah 11:1-10; Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12

"May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O God, my rock and my redeemer." (Psalm 19:14)

Good morning and welcome to morning worship at Christ Church Quaker Farms on the Second Sunday of Advent. Let me begin my remarks by welcoming you to this season of reflection and anticipation.

Our Gospel lesson for this morning records John the Baptist proclaiming "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." (Matt. 3.2) For several reasons this proclamation is very appropriate for Advent. It sounds a note of repentance, asking us to confess how we have fallen short of what our Creator has intended for us and to accept the grace of baptism. Also, it sounds a note of anticipation; John the Baptist acknowledges that "one who is more powerful than I is coming after me." (Matt. 3:11) Although John is anticipating the presence of Jesus as an adult rather than as a newborn child, it is likewise a message of good news for what God is offering to persons of faith—a gift of transformative love.

The other lessons for this morning provide additional perspectives on a promised salvation. Isaiah envisions a future time of divinely delivered peace. "The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them." (Isaiah 11:6) Paul in his letter to the Romans anticipates a hoped-for future with an eloquent entreaty "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing…" (Romans 15:13). "All joy and peace in believing." What better phrase could express the promise of Advent!

However, other notes are sounded in today's lessons that we might hear with some consternation. John the Baptist says that the baptizer to come will bring harsh judgement: "… the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." (Matt. 3:12). Isaiah foresees a similar fate at the hands of the one who is coming: "… he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked." (Isaiah 11:4) These portrayals of divine intervention seem to me to be somewhat inconsistent with the God of love and salvation so beautifully rendered in other passages of today's lessons.

Let us reflect this morning on these various Scripture passages from the vantage of an Anglican theological heritage. There scripture, tradition, and reason are said to jointly inform our understanding of God and the Christian life. Some insight into the Anglican tradition is, I think, evident in the Collect we heard as an introduction to today's Bible readings. "Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way of our

salvation. Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer." The emphasis here is on repentance followed by mercy and joy. More generally, I think that the Anglican tradition de-emphasizes apparently punitive portrayals of God in favor of the salvific work of God and Jesus in his worldly ministry. This tendency promotes a more consistent Christian message.

It is worthwhile to note that inconsistency is in most cases is opposed to reason—the third Anglican resource in addition to tradition and scripture. This is not only the case for deductive systems but also for even the conduct of household affairs. I have on occasion asked my wife to turn down the volume on the Korean movies she is streaming. She has responded that I do not always follow my own advice when listening to rock and roll CDs. It is benefit of many marriages that one has a spouse ever-ready to point out one's inconsistencies.

More to the point, it is an important task of Christian theology—arguably the "logic of God"—to communicate the good news of the Christian gospel in way that is comprehensable and amenable to leading a good Christian life. Some measure of consistency helps with this task. It helps contribute to what the 18th century English philosopher called in the title of a treatise "The Reasonableness of Christianity." In our increasingly secular culture, and at this season when we approach the celebration of God's wondrous incarnation in the baby Jesus, it might be helpful to reflect on the various ways in which faithful Christians can be said to be reasonable.

A commitment to faith and revelation does not preclude being rational in certain ways. One characteristic of rational persons is a willingness to give reasons for what they say and do. If asked why they have adopted Christian faith most people would not appeal to philosophy and arguments for the existence of God, nor to hermeneutics and historical-critical Bible interpretations. These rational resources have value, but
more likely responses would be simple quotations of favorite Gospel verses, or, in the case of persons raised in a Christian family, respondents might cite the teachings of their parents and church. Doing so highlights another trait of rational persons—they accept guidance only from trusted authorities. As children it is certainly not irrational to trust one's parents. As adults, adopting the beliefs and behaviors that are shared with billions of other people yields some credibility. Relying on only trustworthy authorities is especially important in our current cultural context in which conspiracy theories and demagogic pitches abound.

Finally, rational people learn from their personal experiences. Although individual anecdotes do not justify general propositions, when one has experienced Christian faith to be a source of joy for oneself and a motivation to aid others, such experiences provide a pragmatic recommendation for leading a life of Christian faith. I have never had a dramatic "road to Damascus" experience, but I do recall a vivid occasion during graduate school in which I was feeling very distressed and I then had the sense that Jesus knelt beside me and lifted a weight from my chest. This gave me extraordinary comfort. Partially because of this experience, I approach Biblical passages, such as we heard today that include images of God as merciful, but also punitive, with a strong inclination to hear and respond to a message of God's merciful, providential care.

So, in this season of Advent as we await the wonder of Christmas morning, let us turn to God with repentance and hope for a greater fullness of divine presence on Christmas morning. And let us remember that we can do so with a reasonableness fitting to our faith, valuing

consistency, willing to give reasons, accepting only trusted authorities, and being informed by experiences of God's love for us that leads us to love others. Let scripture, tradition, and reason carry us forward through the season of Advent to joy of Christmas day.
Amen.