

Sermon - 14 December 2025

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Date: 14 December 2025

Preacher: Ife Ojetayo

[0:00] Our strength and Redeemer. Amen. Please be seated. Good morning.

Good morning.

Advent places us between two great acts of God. The first coming of our Lord, Jesus Christ, in humility. And his second coming, which we await as he comes in glory to judge the living and the dead.

And the collect appointed for this third Sunday in Advent gathers the whole season into a single prayer. It reminds us that when Christ came the first time, it did not come unannounced.

He sent a messenger before him, John the Baptist, to prepare his way. And then it asked God to grant that the ministers and stewards of Christ's mysteries may now do the same.

[1:43] Until that final day when the Lord returns to judge the world. This morning's epistles and gospel readings teach us who those heralds are.

How they are to be regarded. And what faithfulness looks like when the darkness does not immediately lift. Last week, remember that we saw that the Bible is the instrument by which we prepare for his return.

The Bible is the instrument given to us by God by which we prepare for his return. But the Bible is read, marked, learned, inwardly digested, within the context of the church.

Not without. I'm going to repeat that again. The Bible is read, marked, learned, inwardly digested, within the context of the church. Not without.

But God, God in his manifold wisdom, has commissioned servants, stewards of his word. For the building up of his people. The same Lord who caused all holy scripture to be written for our learning.

[3:01] The same God who caused that has also sent his servants to teach and to preach and to steward that very word. And so to turn the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just.

Therefore, for someone to say, I have the Bible. And I don't need the church. For someone to say that is to insist on seeing the truth with one eye closed.

And to wander around foolishly about in the world without help and without protection. The protection and the help that God has already graciously given is to refuse it and to walk around aimlessly and foolishly.

And so this morning's epistle and gospel confronts us, as it were, with this question. How do we view the ministers of the gospel?

And how do we respond when God's word does not unfold as we expect? Well, the epistle readings in 1 Corinthians 4, we see what Paul has to say about that.

[4:19] St. Paul writes, in chapter 4, verse 1. He writes, he said, this is how one should regard us. The us there is ministers of the gospel.

This is how one should regard us. As servants of Christ. And stewards of the mysteries of God. Now, he's writing, particularly to the context that he's writing to a divided church.

The Corinthian church. The Corinthians were secure in Christ. Paul has already assured them of that. Of their security in Christ. But they were also, in a way, in danger.

Because of their own wrong, worldly thinking. And since chapter 1, Paul has addressed them. I'm sorry. Since chapter 1, Paul has already begun to address a deep fracture caused in that church. By a cult of personality that they were following. Some would say, I follow Paul. And others would say, I follow Apollos. And others would say, we follow Cephas. Cephas is Peter, by the way.

[5:30] St. Peter. And there's this factionalism going on in the Corinthian church. And behind this factionalism was something more serious. That Paul is wanting them against.

There was a growing disdain for the message of the cross. Among the Corinthians. And Paul, the minister of the gospel. Who bears that message of the cross.

Appeared to some of them. Perhaps most of them. As weak. He's a weak guy. The Corinthians were a divided congregation. They were confused about leadership.

They were confused about influence. They were confused about authority. They saw someone in Paul. That wasn't so eloquent. In their own way of thinking things.

He's got a really weak personality. He doesn't look the part. Because that's what they were looking for. They were looking for eloquence.

[6:26] That's what they admired. Mere eloquence. They admired personalities. That's what they followed. And so many of them judged gospel ministry. By this worldly standards.

And so St. Paul responds to them. And their wrong thinking. By reminding them of the nature of his gospel ministry. But he doesn't say it in a boastful way.

In fact, he says the truth about himself. He humbles himself as he says it. He exposes the root of the Corinthian error. Which was that they had misunderstood Christian leadership.

They have a wrong view of Christian leadership. And they also had a wrong view of the gospel. And therefore, they had a wrong view of what it means to be a Christian at all. And Paul corrects them with remarkable clarity.

Paul continues to say, this is how you should regard us. As servants of Christ. As servants of Christ. And as stewards of the mysteries of God.

[7:29] Servants. Servants under authority. A minister is not his own man. He does not speak on his own authority.

He is a servant of Christ. Bound to deliver faithfully what he has received. The church does not belong to the clergy.

Neither does the gospel belong to the church. But both belong to whom? Christ Jesus.

And this truth is meant to guard us against two errors, I think. There is that one error of the exaltation of ministers of the gospel into idols.

We see that all around us. In our celebrity culture. And another thing it guards us against. The other error it guards us against, I think, is contempt of ministers as mere hirelings.

[8:34] A faithful minister is neither a lord nor a performer.

It's not his church. He's a servant. But at the same time, he's not just a performer that you say, dance, jump. He serves only one master.

A steward he is. A steward whose master's feet are always behind him. Even as I say that, it's a somber, fearful sin.

He's a steward who wants to give account. A faithful minister is neither lord, neither is he a performer. He's a steward of holy mysteries, Paul says.

Because the treasure entrusted to the church is not just vague sentimentality, vague spirituality, or just mere moral advice. That's not what entrusted to the church is.

[9:45] What does Paul say is entrusted to the church? He says, it's the mystery of redemption accomplished by Christ crucified. It is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

That's what's entrusted to the church. Note that I didn't say it's just entrusted to the ministers. I said it's entrusted to the whole church. This great mystery.

To which the minister, rightly, is supposed to steward. In scripture it's clear. As Paul says, it is required of stewards to be what?

That they be found faithful. Ministers are servants, not masters. They are stewards, not owners. They are entrusted with the gospel.

They are not free to revise it. To add to it or take away from it. And what is required of them? That they be found faithful. That's important.

[10:44] It's important for us ministers to remind that that is all that is required. Notice that it doesn't say they're required to be admired. It doesn't even say they're required to be successful.

Because oftentimes we fall into this trap of judging success by worldly standards. Man, that guy has a church of 250 people.

I'm a failure. In comparison. That's not the measure by which God judges. And what else?

They're not required to be celebrated. What are they required to be? Found faithful. By the way, brothers and sisters, that's the same requirement of you.

Those who are baptized into Christ. All that God requires is faithfulness. And so then, how are we to judge Christ's servants?

[11:44] Or how are we not to judge them? As Paul will show us. Paul goes on to show us how to measure these stewards of God's mysteries. He does not say, do not judge at all.

That's not what he's saying here. But rather, he's saying, judge rightly. Judge rightly. The Corinthians were judging wrongly. They were judging on the wrong basis.

And they were judging with the wrong timetable. They were not, unlike many today, who expect ministers of the gospel to be celebrities. Or visionaries.

Or spiritual entrepreneurs. Those who desire their priests and bishops to be of the managerial class. CEOs that can grow the business.

Rather than faithful ministers who can tend the flock. But Paul says, that's not what God intended. We are servants.

[12:43] Literally. The word that Paul uses there is under-rows. And in the picture, you have to... The Paul is painting is, if you think of, in the ancient world, there are ships.

And they don't have mottos like we do. You know, you get on a cruise ship, you know, it's powered by an engine. They have manpower. Real manpower. Under... In the galleys. And these people are chained.

It's really blue because most of them are slaves. They're chained to the galley. And what are they to do? Row. Row. And what do they do? What do they hear?

They hear the voice of a commander who tells them, as under-rows, the beat and the pace they must row at.

That's the word, the Greek word that Paul uses to describe servants of ministers of the gospel.

We're under-rows. We're galley slaves. And we're stewards.

[13:45] Entrusted with something, not our own. But the mysteries of God. The gospel of Christ crucified. Therefore, ministers are not to be measured, as I said before, by eloquence.

By charisma. These are wonderful things. But they're not the measure by which God requires the judgment of a faithful minister.

By popularity. By numbers. Numbers can be deceiving. Charisma can be deceiving. Eloquence can be deceiving. Platforms.

You know, there are many people, ministers, who have platforms today. There's nothing wrong with platforms. There are many who use those platforms faithfully. But that's not what you're measured and judged by.

That's not what you're meant to judge ministers of the gospel by. You're not meant to judge them by this kind of success as the world defines it. They're to be measured by faithfulness.

[14:47] And who does this measuring? Who does this judging? And when? Paul follows, Paul places all ministry. Indeed, all of our Christian life, actually.

He places it within the horizon of the second advent. He says, Therefore, do not pronounce judgment before the time. Before the Lord comes.

Who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness. And will disclose the purposes of the heart. What are the Corinthians doing?

They were judging too quickly. And they were judging by the wrong standards. And Paul reminds them that the final verdict belongs to Christ alone.

The final verdict belongs to Christ alone. And this is Advent wisdom for us. As we live in the time between the sowing and the harvest. As we live between the proclamation and the fulfillment.

[15:44] Between the already and not yet. Much in our day, in our time, remains hidden. Motives are unseen. You have no parameters to truly judge motives of the heart.

Only God can do that. So faithfulness often looks, sometimes, like failure. In fact, this is, I think, both a comfort and a warning.

It's a comfort to faithful servants who are dismissed as foolish. Those faithful servants must be comforted by the very fact that the one who will truly judge is God himself.

And it's also a warning to those who are tempted to abandon the gospel for something more respectable. Or to use flashy means as they steward the mysteries of God.

It's a warning for them. That they may engender fame and popularity and the praise of people. But God will judge.

[16:55] And he will judge rightly. He will not use the measure of the world. When Christ comes again, everything will be brought to light. And then Paul says, Each one will receive his commendation from God.

On what basis? On the basis of their faithfulness. And if Paul shows us what a faithful steward looks like, John the Baptist shows us what it costs.

Our gospel reading begins with John the Baptist, the last and greatest of the prophets, as even our Lord himself testified to. It begins with this prophet in prison.

This is the man whom Christ himself will soon call more than a prophet. Jesus said, It is of him that was foretold by Malachi.

The voice crying in the wilderness prepared the way of the Lord. John was a faithful, uncompromised herald of Christ the King.

[18:02] He had announced the nearness of God's kingdom. He had declared that the Messiah would bring judgment. He had told the people that the axe was laid to the root of the trees.

And yet months have passed. The Messiah had begun his ministry. But the wicked and the immoral, Herod, still rules.

The kingdom that John the prophet had proclaimed doesn't seem to have arrived in fire and judgment. As he expected. Israel was not rallying to their true king.

The wicked still ruled. And John remained in chains. And so, he sent words. He sent words to Jesus with a question.

And this question of John the Baptist arises from the strain of faithful obedience. This is not the question of a skeptic or an unbeliever. It is the question of a servant who has obeyed God at great cost.

[19:11] And is now struggling to understand the Lord's timing. And he sent these two disciples to Jesus to ask, Are you the one who is to come?

Or shall we look for another? This is not unbelief. So much as it's anguish from John the Baptist. As if to say, Jesus, cousin, what is the plan?

Where is the kingdom? What are we waiting for? And look at Jesus' answer. Jesus' answer is not harshly.

Rather, Jesus points John to his works. He says to these two disciples, Go and tell John what you hear and what you see.

And what do they hear and what have they seen. The blind receive sight. The lame walk. The lepers are cleansed.

[20:13] The deaf hear. The dead are raised. The poor have good news preached to them. These are now random miracles.

These are the very signs of the promised kingdom. This is signs that the curse is being rolled back. And mercy is flowing outward. That's what Jesus wants John to see.

John had expected the kingdom to come with fire. And Christ reveals that it comes first. With mercy. That's the proclamation of the gospel.

It's the proclamation of good news. Of a merciful God. Who comes to save and rescue and redeem. Judgment will come. But not yet.

And Jesus has a gentle but dire warning. A word. Blessed is the one who is not offended by me.

[21:18] Blessed is the one who is not offended by me. John is reminded of his calling. John is reminded that he's just a herald.

He's not the judge. His task is merely to prepare the way. Not to dictate how the king will reign. The blind see.

The limb walk. The dead are raised. The poor hear good news. The kingdom has come. But not as judgment first. But as mercy. And then comes this gentle warning.

Blessed is the one who is not offended by me. John is expecting vindication. Instead Jesus gives them confirmation. Confirmation. Of the reign of his kingdom.

Already. Taking place. John wanted immediate rescue. But immediate rescue would have been judgment. And it would have been dire judgment.

[22:21] Because no one. Would have been saved. Instead Jesus gives them assurance. That yes. Judgment will come. But now is the time.

Of mercy. It's time to turn to the savior. And the redeemer. The herald. Is reminded. The minister of the gospel. Is reminded.

Your task. Is not to judge. The king's strategy. Your task. Is to proclaim. The king's message. And there's another truth.

In today's gospel. That we must face. Brothers and sisters. Those whom Christ sends. To prepare the way. For his coming. Do not always receive honor. From others. Their faithfulness. May be questioned.

As seen from the example. Of St. Paul. And St. John. But Christ himself. Will speak for them. When he comes. He will acknowledge. Those who acknowledge him. He will bear witness.

[23 : 17] To those who bore witness to him. Before the world. That's what we. The means by which. There will be judges. Faithfulness. And that was the case. With John the Baptist. What does John then be.

What does Jesus do. After these people have left. And he's addressing the crowd. Jesus. The king. Bore witness. To his herald.

The messenger. He bore faithful witness. To the character. Of this messenger. In verse 7. Jesus addressed the crowd. What did you go out. Into the wilderness.

To see. A wreath shaken by the wind. Jesus reminds them. John did not come among you. In comfort or convenience. You saw him with your own eyes. You know what kind of man he was. He was not weak. Or wavering. He's not someone who would bend. At every opinion. Or pressure. He was steadfast. He was courageous.

[24 : 12] He was unflinching. In the face of danger. As he proclaimed the message. Entrusted to him. His flame did not flicker. His flame did not flicker. But shone bright.

In the darkness. Of sin all around him. And Jesus presses the question further. What then did you go to see? Someone dressed in soft clothing. Living a soft life.

Of leisure. And luxury. No. You were drawn to this John. Precisely because his life was hard. And disciplined. In him was the simplicity.

And severity. Of the prophets of old. He was clothed in rough garments. He lived far from comfort. And he was a voice crying in the wilderness. Jesus goes even further still.

In his commendation. Of this faithful servant. Did you go out to see a prophet? Yes you did. But this John is more. Even than a prophet. The prophets before.

[25 : 13] Spoke of Christ. From a distance. John the Baptist. The last and greatest of them. Stood at the threshold. He did not only announce. The coming of this king.

As the prophets before him did. He stood in the presence. Of this king. And Jesus reminds us.

Behold. It was of him. That was spoken. I send him. My messenger. Before your face. We shall prepare. Your way before you. This. John. Was the one prophesied.

Long ago. And so. As Jesus. Commended. His faithful servant. God. What of us.

What was once done. By single figures. In the Old Testament. Or by one king. Or one prophet. At a time.

[26 : 08] Christ. As he reigns now. As entrusted. His gospel. No longer to just one herald. But to many. Thousands upon thousands. Of heralds.

Are sent out. Are commissioned. By the church. To be ministers. Of his gospel. A great cloud of witness. Now goes forth. Bearing testimony. To his coming. And yet.

This calling. Carries. Still. A heavy weight. The calling. The weight. The message entrusted. Is to prepare. The way.

For the one. Who is coming. Our ministry. Is not different. Than. John the Baptist's ministry. It is still the same. We are meant to tell the world.

He is coming. Prepare. We are meant to do it faithfully.

[27 : 02] In the face of opposition. It is a serious responsibility. To be entrusted. With the care of Christ's flock. Those who teach. Shepherd. And minister.

The sacraments. Those who must prepare others. To meet God. At his judgment seat. It is a weighty responsibility. Yet priests. And people. Clergy.

And laity. Are bound together. In this work. We stand. Of four. As one. So that is why. The people must be diligent. In praying for their ministers.

In the church. And the ministers. Must be diligent. In praying for their flock. God. This is why. It is fitting.

I think. And even hopeful. To speak of this. Weigh responsibility. On this third Sunday of Advent. As we approach. The feast of Christ's birth. We.

[27:57] You know. It is true. That we often lament. The weakness of the church. We see weakness. All around us. Even that. Some of that weakness. Is even close to home. We lament. The shortage. Of faithful clergy. The lack. Of spiritual strength. The many. Who perish. Through ignorance. Or wrong teaching. Or neglect. But we. As we lament. Do all this lamenting. We neglect. The very fact. That our prayer. Our fervent prayers. Are the very means. God has ordained. To bring about revival. In his church. And so. As we lament. Brothers and sisters. Let's also be given. To prayer. To ask God. To revive. His church. To strengthen. His ministers. Yesterday. Was. December 13. Was. The day. The church. The church. Commemorated.

[28:54] St. Lucy. Of Syracuse. Lucy. The name. Means light. Lucia. She was not. An ordained. Minister. Of the gospel. And yet. She was a minister.

Nevertheless. She's remembered. Because. She was a faithful. Bearer. Of the light. Of Christ. Lucy lived. During. A time of persecution. And yet. She confessed. Christ openly. She refused. To deny. Our Lord. Even when threatened. With humiliation. And death. And according. To ancient tradition. Of persecutors. Sought to extinguish. A witness. By destroying. A sight. Yet. She refused. To give up Christ. She brought. Faithful witness. To Christ. In a dark world. Trusting. Not only. In earthly vindication. But trusting. In what? The judgment.

[29:47] Of God. Like John. In prison. Like Paul. Under scrutiny. By a worldly. Minded church. Lucy. Like them.

Was a faithful. Herald. And light bearer. She did not see. The triumph. Of the church. In her lifetime. She saw. Only the cross. Of Christ. Which she gladly. Carried. Even unto her death. So. Brothers and sisters. I think. Advent reminds us. That the church. Is always. Preparing the way. Of the Lord. That's what we're called to do. We're prepared. The way of the Lord. In our faithfulness. Not by spectacle. But by faithfulness. We live in a world. Impatient for results. In fact. We ourselves. Sometimes. Are impatient for results. And we're quick to judge. We're tempted. To soften. The message. Of repentance. We're often threatened.

[30:44] Or tempted. To hide. The offense. Of the cross. We're tempted. To seek. The acceptance. The world's acceptance.

Rather than. Seek truth. Those temptations. Are real. I know. But Christ. Still speaks. Through his church. But he speaks. Through a faithful church. He still calls. Ministers. To steward. His mysteries. He still calls. All the baptized. To bear witness. As light bearers. In a darkened world. And this may cost us. In fact. Not may. This will cost us. What will it cost us? It will cost us comfort. We must be ready to. Be uncomfortable. For the sake of the gospel. Both ministers. And clergy. And laity. It may cost us. In fact. I think it will cost us.

[31:43] Sometimes. Reputation. It may cost us. Even peace. But it's a false peace. After all. We have the true peace. It may cost us.

Even more than that. As it did. John the Baptist. As it did. St. Paul. As it did. St. Lucie. It may cost us. It costs. Many of our brothers and sisters. Around the world. More. But even as we wait. This third son of Advent. Reminds us. It's often. It's. It's. Gaudete. It's a. It's a. It's a. Latin word. It just means. Rejoice. And it seems. As we look at the epistles. In our readings. It seems like it doesn't fit. But it does fit. Because. As we wait. And as we long. And we hope. We rejoice. Why do we rejoice? We rejoice.

[32:38] We rejoice. Not because judgment. Has already come. We rejoice. Because salvation. Has already begun. We rejoice. Because the kingdom. Is here. Among us. Present. The light shines. Even in the midst. Of the darkness. And darkness cannot. And will not. Overcome it. St. John. Rejoiced. In prison. Upon hearing. The report. That Jesus sent to him. St. Paul. Rejoiced. In his suffering. For the sake of the gospel. St. Lucie. Rejoiced. In risking our life.

To hate. Our. Imprisoned. Siblings. In Christ. Tradition. Said. Said. That. She would bring food. To the. Imprisoned. Christians. In the catacombs. And she wore the crown.

Of candles. Because. So she can have more hands. To bear. Food. To. To her siblings. And she was caught. And joyfully. She remained steadfast. Even when they told her.

[33:34] To recant. To her. To her. To her. To her. She remained steadfast. Even unto death. And we. Brothers and sisters. We rejoice. As we follow. In their train.

Bearing our cross. Extolling Christ. Crucified. Risen. And exalted. Because we know. What do we know? We know how the story.

Ends. So. Knowing that. We refuse. To be offended. By Christ. We will not be like those. Who are offended. By Christ. We will not be offended.

By his gospel. We will not be ashamed. Of his gospel. We refuse. To be that. We refuse. Also. To be impatient. For judgment. We await.

God's timing. We are just arrows. We are not the judge. And we. Commit to being faithful. In preparation.

[34:32] When Christ comes again. In glory. To judge the world. May he find us. Clergy and laity. Alike. Acceptable people. In his sight.

In the name of the Father. And of the Son. And of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen.