

SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYER
St. John the Baptist (June 24)¹

Lessons:²

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the fourth Chapter of Malachi.³

“For, behold, the day cometh, that shall burn as an oven; and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble: and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith [SETH] the LORD of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch.

“But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings; and ye shall go forth, and grow up as calves of the stall. And ye shall tread down the wicked; for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet in the day that I shall do this, saith [SETH] the LORD of hosts.

“Remember ye the law of Moses my servant, which I commanded unto him in Horeb for all Israel, with the statutes and judgments.

“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD: And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the second Verse of the eleventh Chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew.⁴

“... Now when John had heard in the prison the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples, And said unto him, Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another? Jesus answered and said unto them, Go and shew [SHOW] John again those things which ye do hear and see: The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me.

“And as they departed, Jesus began to say unto the multitudes concerning John, What went ye out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken with the wind? But what went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? behold, they that wear soft clothing are in kings’ houses. But what went ye out for to see? A prophet? yea, I say unto you, and more than a prophet. For this is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee. Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force. For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John. And if ye will receive it, this is Elias,⁵ which was for to come. He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.

“But whereunto shall I liken this generation? It is like unto children sitting in the markets, and calling unto their fellows, And saying, We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced; we have mourned unto you, and ye have not lamented. For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, He hath a devil. The Son of man came eating and drinking, and they say, Behold a man gluttonous, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners. But wisdom is justified of her children.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Gospel: “And Jesus answered them, ‘Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them.’⁶ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

¹⁶ St. Matthew 11:4b-5a (RSV).

¹⁷ Isaiah 29:18 (RSV).

¹⁸ Isaiah 35:5a (RSV).

¹⁹ St. Matthew 11:5a (RSV).

²⁰ Isaiah 35:6a (RSV).

²¹ St. Matthew 11:5b (RSV).

²² Isaiah 29:18 (RSV).

²³ Isaiah 35:5 (RSV).

²⁴ St. Matthew 11:5b (RSV).

²⁵ Isaiah 29:19 (RSV).

²⁶ Isaiah 61:1b-2 (RSV).

²⁷ Priest-in-Charge, Holy Angels Anglican Catholic Mission, Picayune MS; Honorary Canon, The Diocese of the Resurrection, and Honorary Canon and Canon to the Ordinary, The Diocese of New Orleans, The Anglican Catholic Church.

Introduction:

The Gospel of St. Matthew is structured in a very specific way⁷ that begins with the birth and infancy of Jesus⁸ and builds toward its climax with His Resurrection.⁹ In between those two terminals, and before reaching the dramatic events of Christ's rejection by the Jewish populace¹⁰ and his Passion and death,¹¹ it covers, in order, the essentials of His teachings as given in the Sermon on the Mount,¹² His mighty works which are the evidence of His divine authority for those teachings,¹³ and the claims by Him and by His followers that, as the divine figure who was able to perform those works and give those teachings, He was the long-promised Messiah.¹⁴

The result is a systematic exposition of the actual events of Our Lord's life, an exposition that is even more complete than St. Mark's action-filled narrative, and also an exposition that not only states the critical events but thereafter explains the ultimate meaning of those events as acts in the ongoing drama of God's salvific interactions with human kind.

Theme:

Today's Gospel is taken from the part of St. Matthew's book that sets out the basis of Christ's claims to be the Messiah whose coming was foretold by the ancient prophets. In order to answer the questions posed to Jesus by the disciples of John the Baptist, He points to particular actions that recur throughout His ministry: "And Jesus answered them, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see....'"¹⁵

These incidents will be recognized by John's disciples as proofs of Jesus's messiahship. Two of them, raising the dead and curing lepers, have upon them the unmistakable stamp of divinity because their accomplishment is beyond any conceivable human power. The other four are visibly messianic because they fulfill specific predictions made long previously by Isaiah, the Old Tes-

tament's greatest prophet of the events that will accompany the coming of that Messiah.

Development:

Thus Jesus commences by telling His inquirers: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight...."¹⁶ This is a direct reference to Isaiah's words, "In that day... out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see"¹⁷ and, in another place, "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened...."¹⁸

Then Our Lord continues His catalogue of messianic acts by saying that with His coming, "the lame walk"¹⁹. This is the fulfillment of Isaiah's promise that "then shall the lame man leap like a hart...."²⁰

When Jesus points out that "the deaf hear,"²¹ this is a direct citation from Isaiah: "In that day the deaf shall hear the words of a book..."²² and, in another place, "Then ... the ears of the deaf [shall be] unstopped...."²³

Christ's description of His ministry as "the poor have good news preached to them"²⁴ echoes not only Isaiah's promise that "The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the LORD, and the poor among men shall exult in the Holy One of Israel",²⁵ but the prophet's ringing declaration, "the LORD has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn...."²⁶

Thus the "bottom line" of Our Lord's colloquy with the messengers from John the Baptist is the unmistakable connection of the person and work of Jesus with that One Who, according to Isaiah, was to be sent as God's representative to Israel. And this Scriptural proof of Christ's rôle as the Messiah, the Anointed One of God, is the essential theme of John the Baptist's own ministry as the forerunner or herald of that Messiah.

Conclusion:

You will recall that we frequently refer to John throughout the Advent season because the Coming which he heralded is likewise the theme of that season of anticipation. During it, we, like the ancient Jews, await the Coming of the One Who will be sent from God. They awaited His First Coming; we await His Second Coming. They awaited the beginning of the Age of Salvation; we await its conclusion. But both they and we wait and we wait on the same One: true God and true man, the Second Person of the holy and undivided Trinity, Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

And we, like they, face the same essential question as we ponder the message of the Baptist: When that One comes, for Whom we wait, will He find us worthy of Him? As the Collect for the Third Sunday in Advent puts it, at His second coming to judge the world, will we be found an acceptable people in His sight?

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The Rev'd Canon John A. Hollister, JD²⁷

¹ This sermon was originally written on the Gospel for the Fourth Sunday in Advent, 2012.

² *Lessons Proper for Holy Days Not Included in the Foregoing Table*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xlvi (Anglican Church of Canada 1962).

³ Malachi 4:1-end (KJV).

⁴ St. Matthew 11:2-19 (KJV).

⁵ *I.e.*, Elijah. Cf. Malachi 4:5.

⁶ St. Matthew 11:4-5 (RSV).

⁷ *R. E. Nixon, Matthew*, in D. GUTHRIE AND J. A. MOTYER, eds., THE NEW BIBLE COMMENTARY REVISED, 3rd Ed. 813-814 (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970).

⁸ St. Matthew 1:1—2:23.

⁹ St. Matthew 28.

¹⁰ St. Matthew 13:53—17:27.

¹¹ St. Matthew 26:1—27:66.

¹² St. Matthew 5:1—7:29.

¹³ St. Matthew 8:1—9:34.

¹⁴ St. Matthew 11:1—12:50.

¹⁵ St. Matthew 11:4 (RSV).