

Sun. next before Advent (2024)

One of the oldest gods of the ancient Romans, if not the oldest, was one by the name of Janus. He looked after doors and gateways.

In statues he is often pictured having two faces looking in opposite directions – one into the past, the other into the future.

It is from Janus – very appropriately – we get the name for the first month of the new year, January.

The Sunday next before Advent likewise has an affinity with Janus. It is a Sunday with two faces looking in opposite directions.

One looks back on Trinity, the season in which we have been for the past 26 weeks, the other forward to Advent, the season we begin this coming Sunday.

Before we leave the old behind, it is appropriate we reflect on where we have been, the territory we have traversed.

As suggested with the green altar hangings, Trinity is a season of growth.

In it, we move beyond looking at the bare facts surrounding our Lord's life and ministry to applying His teachings and precepts to our lives.

Growth is the goal: growth in knowledge, growth in holiness, growth in service.

A hymn of my youth goes like this:

More about Jesus would I know,
More of His grace to others show;
More of His saving fullness see,
More of His love who died for me.

The stanza that follows continues

More about Jesus let me learn,
More of His holy will discern;
Spirit of God, my teacher be,
Showing the things of Christ to me

The spirit of Trinity is suggested in the key word of this hymn – “more”.

More intellectual understanding, yes, but also more in term of living out whom we have been declared to be in our baptism.

Put another way, learning to live as faithful and productive members of the Lord’s New Covenant family.

My neighbors and members of this church, Jere and Pat McConnell, over the years have taken in many homeless dogs.

When these dogs arrive, they are clueless about the household rules and expectations. But

with love and discipline and Pat's stern looks they learn.

It's probably not the best practice to compare people with dogs. Even so, we might draw a parallel with what takes place with the McConnell dogs and what should take place with us in Trinity-tide.

Just as the McConnell dogs grow in knowledge and understanding of what is expected of them as members of that household, so should we as members of God's household.

Look back on your own life. Has there been any growth over the past six months?

Have you made any progress in applying the teachings of the scriptures to your day-to-day circumstances?

Paul in Philippians 3:14 says: “*I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.*”

That is what we all should be doing.

The language is different but that is what we are asking in today’s Collect, when we say: “**Stir up, we beseech thee, O Lord, the wills of thy faithful people.**”

We are asking that we will be prodded to action, that we will be more than hearers of the Word. Doers is what we want to be.

Looking back, has our understanding of the Gospel increased? As a former Presiding Bishop once said: You can’t share what you don’t know.”

Are we living out our faith in such a way that we are provocative Christians? Does our

manner of life invite those outside these walls to ask questions?

What about in our personal lives? Are we actively seeking to put away destructive practices and attitudes?

Doing such things as: keeping anger of the destructive sort at bay, repelling resentment and anything like an unforgiving spirit, while cultivating contentment, patience, frugality in expenditures and a constructive way of interacting with other people.

Are we practicing the Christ-like art of noticing, noticing the needs of others and responding to them?

What about our use of time, talent and money? Are we using them wisely and in the Lord's service?

Thursday is Thanksgiving. Are we paying attention to God's good gifts all around us and taking time daily to say 'thank you'?

Growth in knowledge. Growth in service. Growth in witness. Growth in awareness. That is what we seek. So, we pray today that our wills will be stirred up, apathy turned to action.

But we also on this Sunday look forward to Advent. He who came, comes.

Martin Luther, the great German reformer of the 16th century, was once asked what he would do today if he knew the Lord was coming tomorrow. He said: "I would plant an apple tree."

In other words, he would be about the many little duties God places before us day by day.

May it be so with us. May God stir our wills to plant many apple trees . . . to awake to love and work.

So far, I have said nothing about today's readings. In them we find overtones of Advent.

In today's portion of scripture appointed for the Epistle, Jeremiah gives a prophecy of a good king coming out of David's royal line:

“BEHOLD, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will raise unto David a righteous Branch, and a King shall reign and prosper, and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth.”

And in today's Gospel, we find that prophecy fulfilled. The One Jeremiah foretold shows up.

And those who ate the miraculous bread in the wilderness recognized Him.

“This is of a truth that prophet that should come into the world,” we hear them say the end of the meal.

Specifically, they were recalling a prophecy found in Deuteronomy 18:15. Moses is speaking here to the children of Israel:

“The Lord thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me; unto him ye shall hearken.”

In context, God had revealed to Moses what the future held for His people. They were not going to keep their side of the covenant made with them at Mt. Sinai.

But, in spite of their unfaithfulness, God was determined to remain faithful to His promises. He was going to send Someone who would bring in a new day for them and the world. A new Covenant was coming.

Jesus was that One. He brought in the New Covenant sealed with His blood at Calvary.

What are we to make of the prophecy and fulfilment found in these two passages?

I think it is this: God can be trusted. The world may appear to be out of control, but God has a plan and is working it out with each passing day and year.

He is the reality of which Janus, the ancient Roman god, is a parody. He sees both backward and forward and is at work at both ends.

But there is another thing we dare not miss . . . this one coming from today's Gospel reading: You and I are called to be more than bystanders as God bring His purposes to bear in the world.

We learn this from the way Jesus gets the food He miraculously had multiplied out to the people.

He did what only He could do as the Son of God – multiplied it – but then He handed it over to the disciples to pass out . . . to get out to the hungry mob.

He has a basket of bread with your name on it to hand out. The same is true for me.

And so, we pray this morning that our wills will be stirred, that we will take that basket joyfully and do our part.

More about Jesus let me learn. But also, more of His work let me do. “Spirit of God my teacher be.”

May this be our prayer as we head into a new church year and as we look forward to His coming, be that coming near or far.

