



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

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Sunday, December 17, 2006
The Third Sunday of Advent (Gaudete)

Festal Eucharist
at 11am

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, Rector
on
Saint Luke 3:7-18

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INCENSE AND SULFUR

"His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." So, with many other exhortations, [John the Baptist] preached good news to the people.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Every once in a while, at a service where we are using incense (such as today, *Gaudete* Sunday in Advent), when the clergy, the acolytes and the choir are gathering in the ambulatory for the start of the procession, a new choirboy who has not experienced incense will make a little performance by fanning the air or coughing; this provides the Rector with a an occasion for some on the spot teaching of the faith. I tell the boys that there are two smells in eternity mentioned in the Bible – incense and sulfur. I advise them that it would be best to choose incense and to start getting used to it now.

In today's Gospel according to Saint Luke, John the Baptist prepares the way for Christ by presenting the alternatives of repentance or destruction. The prophet uses the image of fire for God the Holy Spirit, an image which will recur in Saint Luke's second volume, the Acts of the Apostles, when, after Christ's resurrection from the dead and ascension into heaven, the Holy Spirit at Pentecost descends upon the apostles in a rushing wind and in tongues of fire. Today, John the Baptist prophesies this event concerning Christ: "I baptize you with water; but he who is mightier than I is coming, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."

Fire burns up the chaff. Fire consumes the dross and purifies the metal. When incense is put on a hot burning coal (as we will do today at the altar), a sweet smelling cloud perfumes the air. When sulfur (brimstone) is put on a coal, a stench fills the air. In the Book of Revelation, sweet incense rises before the throne of God and accompanies the prayers of the saints; also, the devil and his followers go to their own place, the pit with its burning, stinking lake of fire and brimstone. These are the atmospherics of eternity! The fire, the pure holiness and goodness of God, is constant. What comes into contact with this fire, good or evil, is indicated by the incense or the sulfur. With this alternative in mind, we are bidden to cast away the works of darkness and to put upon us the armor of light, to prepare the way of the Lord in our lives.

Biblical prophets do not come to praise and congratulate us. John the Baptist comes to give us fair warning, and we shouldn't shoot the messenger; for the messenger is sent by a loving, merciful God who takes no pleasure in the death or destruction of anyone but rather calls us to turn back to him and live. John's advice is well worth heeding. To his fellow Jews the prophet says, Bear fruits that befit repentance. Do not say to yourselves, Abraham is our father, for God can raise up children to Abraham from the stones. In other words, we are not saved by the mere credentials of ecclesiastical or social birthright or entitlement. We are all called to repent – even Episcopalians.

There is more good counsel from John the Baptist. Share what you have with those who are in need, if it be a coat or food that is needed; or, for that matter, your time, your care, your effort in some work of love, charity or sacrifice. Tax collectors, actually all who are in the business of money, are not to gouge, to steal or to extort. So likewise, all of us are to manage our money justly and generously. Soldiers are not to rob by violence or false accusation and are to be content with what they have, advice which can be taken by all of us across the board; for violence has many forms, physical and verbal, and greed and envy sow discord and cause all sorts of strife throughout the social order.

This is good, clear advice for all of us, to prepare the Lord's way and to prepare for Christmas and the devout reception of Christ in the Sacrament. But John the Baptist is not the end, he is forerunner. Jesus Christ is the end. I conclude with some words about what this means. It is Good News.

Today, because it is *Gaudete* or Refreshment Sunday, is a fitting day to refresh ourselves in two old basics of the faith, the Summary of the Law, and the Comfortable Words. At the start of the liturgy, as in John the Baptist's message, we are reminded about the Law and the Prophets and the command to love God above all and to love our neighbors as ourselves. Jesus says all Ten Commandments can be reduced to these two, and his summary is good preparation for what follows.

Right after we recite the General Confession of sin and receive the words of forgiveness, today we shall hear the Comfortable Words, which are really the whole Gospel of Jesus in a nutshell. We hear Christ's call to us to come to him for refuge, for he is a haven of rest and strength. We hear Saint Paul's sure saying that Christ Jesus came into this world, not to condemn, but to save sinners. We hear Saint John say that if any of us sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous. This reassurance is the Propitiation, the Atonement, the Mercy, the Pity, and the Redemption that is our crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ. Here is a comfort, an anchor, bedrock, for our souls. When all else is shaken, there is this Fact of all facts of life to hang onto, always, for dear life! These are Comfortable Words indeed, after which it is most appropriate to bid Peace to one another and to lift up our hearts in the Sacrament.

Every Eucharist presents the full drama of salvation; of preparation, of repentance, of peace, and of communion, with the Lord and, in the Lord, with one another. Our self-will is self-destructive and smells of sulfur, and so we are well warned by the John the Baptist and all the prophets before him about that "unquenchable fire." But he truly preaches good news on behalf of a loving God who has no pleasure in death or destruction. On the contrary God through the prophet prepares us for tidings of comfort and joy – so that we might embrace Christ and live lives which rise before the Lord as the incense.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.