

“Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful.” (1 Corinthians 4.2)

Can you remember a time in your life that you needed to do some research? Perhaps it was for an assignment in school, or for something at work. Maybe it was even to prove a theory you had, or for digging up some family history. Our society’s relationship to research and depth of knowledge has fluctuated over the years, and despite having abundant, infinite resources at our fingertips, it would seem that the depth of research done for many casual questions is limited. Our attention span as a society is so short, that we often are distracted by something else before we’ve even begun any depth of research into something else.

I mention this idea of research, even of ‘following up’, because it is relevant to our biblical themes for today. I would like to draw our limited attention to two moments. First, in the Epistle, St. Paul says “This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God” (1 Cor. 4.1). And second, in our Gospel reading, John the Baptist seeks confirmation about the identity of Christ from his prison cell.

Christians should be identifiable by being servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God, Paul says. This idea of *stewardship* is one that Paul mentions at least twelve times throughout his letters. Christians are entrusted with the stewardship of the gospel. What does it mean to be a steward? It is to be entrusted as a caretaker of something that is not ours. The Gospel is God’s, but we have been entrusted with its knowledge, its Good News. But here, St. Paul does not simply say that Christians are the stewards of the *Gospel*, but stewards of the *mysteries of God*. We are to be the caretakers of the mysteries of God. Here, “mystery” has its fuller meaning of “something beyond understanding” not just “something we don’t know”. Early Christian theology, therefore, defined a mystery as something that we can never understand of God unless he reveals it to us. The *sacred mysteries* include the gospel, of course, because the mysteries are at the core of our faith: the virgin birth, the Incarnation, Christ’s resurrection. But they also encompass those things which continue to be unexplainable to us: how the Sacraments actually *work*, how the bread and wine *become* the body and blood of Christ, how God’s spirit dwells in us, etc. We are surrounded by the great mysteries of the faith, but they act to call us closer into God’s presence as we try to understand them. So, this question remains: how can we be good stewards of something we can’t understand? How can we be servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God if we don’t fully understand the mysteries? My sidestepping answer could be: “that itself is a mystery!”, but I believe that St. John the Baptist gives us some insight to this question.

In our Gospel lesson, we have a scene of John the Baptist near the end of his life. He is in prison at the command of Herod Antipas, because he had loudly criticized the ruler for having married his brother’s ex-wife. Having heard about Jesus’ deeds, John sent some of his disciples to ask Jesus if he was the awaited one. In response, Jesus gives a summary of his miraculous acts (using some of the language we heard in Isaiah 35) to confirm he is, in fact, the one. He then goes on to praise John as being the greatest of the prophets, and even goes as far as to say he is “Elijah who is to come” in verse 14. As John has borne witness to Jesus before, Jesus now bears witness to John.

But if John the Baptist *is* the greatest of the prophets, shouldn’t he have known that Jesus was the one? After all, didn’t he already say that Jesus *was* the one? (He did). But yet, we see here in John something that makes him truly a human: John exhibits some doubt. The great prophet, whom St. Luke tells us leapt in the womb of his mother in the presence of Jesus’ mother Mary, whose purpose was to pave in the desert a highway for our God, experienced doubt. Could he have been wrong that Jesus was the Messiah? He was imprisoned after all, and was perhaps starting to question what he had earlier been convinced was true. John was the steward of all the prophecies of old, but did his doubt cast all his previous faithfulness into question?

I think it’s possible for us to see ourselves here in John the Baptist. We all experience doubt in our journeys of faith, even if at other times we are absolutely certain. John might have been one of the most certain about Jesus’ identity, yet he still questioned it. Here he was, at perhaps the weakest he ever was in the public eye, sitting in prison. He was starting to question what he had said because he

got landed in jail. Where's the glory of the Messiah in that? But how did he resolve his question? He went to the source, he posed it directly to Jesus, which for him was the best research he could manage: "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" (Matt. 11.3). Rather than sit in his doubt, he asked. Rather than internally question what he understood to be true, he dug deeper. This is an example that John the Baptist gives for us at this time as we approach the end of Advent: that if we are experiencing doubts about what we believe, we need to dig deeper – we need to do more research. And sometimes, that research means we need to speak to God (which for us means prayer).

If a mystery is something that is beyond understanding until it is revealed to us, then what John really was facing was a mystery. He was facing the mystery of whether Jesus really was the Messiah until Jesus revealed it plainly to his disciples. And if, according to St. Paul, we are to be stewards of the mysteries of God, we must endeavour to understand what limited amount has been revealed to us the best way we can. And that which we don't understand, we must offer it back to God so that one day perhaps we might understand it, or at least that we can pass it on faithfully even if we never understood it.

This idea of a mystery being gradually revealed to us is very relevant to our entire Advent journey thus far. We began three weeks ago in a place of relative darkness: a place where we were told of prophecies that were about to come true. We were encouraged to wake up and see what was happening and prepare for what was to come. Last week, of course, "what is to come" was laid out in rather drastic terms when Jesus was describing the second coming, the time of darkness and destruction when the Son of Man would return to the earth. But in that end, we found the hope of new beginnings. In that end, we found that each moment of our lives brought us a little bit closer to that final glory of God. In today's lessons, we understand a little bit more about *who* that hope looks like, for it finds its place in the man Jesus. The mystery of Messiah who is both God and man: we have a face to the name. Next week of course, rather than approaching the cradle in Bethlehem with uncertainty, John the Baptist will proclaim in no uncertain terms who Jesus is and we will come face to face with our saviour. This is part of our journey of the season to know who Jesus is, and why his coming to the earth is so important for us. Jesus himself is a great mystery who is revealed. Jesus is God made flesh.

So, for John the Baptist to experience a moment of doubt despite his certainty, it gives us hope that God is still at work even if we don't recognize him. It gives us hope that the promises of God will still come true even if we don't notice him. That is part of what Advent is for: to teach us who God is, and why he came in the flesh. But it also asks us to try our best *to* recognize him, to remember what he has told us so that we are not caught off guard. So that when he comes again, we can be open to receiving him for we don't know when he's coming. So, in our doubt, in our moments of uncertainty, like John we can turn to our Lord and ask for guidance that we may be both servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries.

And although we are in this intense season of preparation, we must not let the hard work of preparation suddenly 'let go' after Christmas like it's all over. Because "it ain't over til' it's over" – and until the day of our Lord's coming, we are constantly preparing even though the church year moves on. Advent simply teaches us how to prepare and reminds us of this each year. But the work never stops. We never really stop being ministers of Christ and stewards of the mysteries. It is something that stays with us each and every day of our lives.

So, may we find encouragement in the example of John the Baptist that it's not always an easy task, and sometimes we perhaps fall off the path. But let us turn to the Lord for the answers, and continue to rely on him to help us be faithful stewards so that we may constantly seek to know him and make him known.

May we towards the end of this Advent season continue to pave the way for Jesus to come to the earth, and may we continue these preparations every day of our lives.