

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Welcome to the Appleton Chapel. Perhaps you want to welcome me. It's been a while since I've joined you here for Morning Prayers, but I'm delighted to, on this, the last service of Morning Prayers for the fall term.

I invite you please, to rise and join in saying the responsorial psalm, which is number 34 in black psalter.

I will bless the Lord at all times. His praise shall continually be in my mouth.

Congregation:

My soul makes its boast in the Lord; let the humble hear and be glad.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Oh, magnify the Lord with me and let us exalt his name together.

Congregation:

I sought the Lord, and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

This poor soul cried and was heard by the Lord and was saved from every trouble.

Congregation:

O taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are those who take refuge in him.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Come, O children, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord.

Congregation:

The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their cry.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

The face of the Lord is against evildoers, to cut off the remembrance of them from the earth.

Congregation:

Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord rescues them from them all.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

He keeps all their bones; not one of them will be broken.

Congregation:

The Lord redeems the life of his servants; none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned.

Choir:

(singing)

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

This is a reading from the 12th chapter of the Gospel of Luke, beginning at the 35th verse.

"Jesus said, 'Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit. Be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. Blessed are those servants whom the master finds alert when he comes. Truly, I tell you, he will fasten his belt, and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them. If he comes during the middle of the night or near dawn and finds him so, blessed are those servants. But know this, if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. You also must be ready, for the son of man is coming at an unexpected hour.'" Here ends the lesson.

Today is the feast day of Ambrose of Milan, Archbishop and Doctor of the church. A very influential early Christian saint, lived in the fourth century. Augustine, the important theologian, entertained Christianity as a possibility, because he heard Ambrose's speech. And I taught, actually, I used to teach the intro course for all the incoming MDs at HDS. And one year I taught a text by Ambrose called, On the Duties of the Clergy. And I really sort of like Ambrose after that. I'm not sure the students did, but I really started to like Ambrose after that.

Ambrose came from a Roman Christian family, born in 339. We don't really know the identity of his father. We think he was some sort of Roman official. The legend is that, when Ambrose was an infant, a swarm of bees landed on his face, and then they departed with him unharmed, and a drop of honey on his lips. And that's when his father knew he would be sweet tongued. His father died, and his mother took him and their family to Rome, where Ambrose studied law, literature, and rhetoric. He advanced quickly and was successful. He was appointed governor of Liguria, in Aemilia, which was headquartered in Milan. Diocletian, the emperor, had moved the western capital to Milan in 286. So Milan at a time was the most important city in the West, and there was a rivalry with Constantinople.

This is also a time of great controversy in the church. The Arians and the Catholics were at odds with each other, and even so much that to be contesting individual churches. In 374, the Bishop of Milan, a man named Auxentius died, and he was an Arian, and he was supposed to be replaced. They were voting for a new bishop. And this is an incredibly volatile situation, because the Arians wanted their man bishop, and the Catholics wanted their man bishop. And so, Ambrose as the governor of the region, went to the cathedral to kind of keep the peace and monitor things.

And the story is, as soon as he walked in, a chant rose up. He was Catholic. A chant rose up among everyone, Arians and Catholics alike, when Ambrose walked in of, "Ambrose, Bishop. Ambrose, Bishop." Ambrose had never been baptized, or done any theological training. He ran and hid in a friend's house. His friend agreed with the crowds and turned him over. And in one week, here's a tidbit for our seminary students here. In one week, he was baptized, ordained, and consecrated bishop of the most important city in the West, Milan. And then he started studying theology.

He was famous in his day, both for his preaching, this honey tongued reputation, but also for his resistance and courage in the face of imperial power. The emperor of the West was an Arian,

Valentinian II, during most of Ambrose's service, and there was lots of conflict between him and the emperor, and Ambrose never backed down. In some cases, standing in front of the doors of churches that armies had come to claim for the Arians. And he would just stand there, one bishop, in front of a whole army, and refused to let them in, and faced potential kidnapping, and exile, and imprisonment.

He was also very unapologetic in his preaching, especially his preaching about justice. And this is the thing I discovered when teaching this text. Something I didn't know about Ambrose. This is one line from On the Duties of the Clergy. "The church has gold, not to store it up, but to lay it out, and to spend it on those in need. What need is there to guard what is of no use? Is it not much better that the priest should melt the gold down for the sustenance of the poor when other supplies fail? Wouldn't be Lord himself ask, 'Why did you allow so many to die of hunger? Didn't you have gold?'"

These are strong words from the 4th century that echo to our own day. And these words, which echo even more strongly, at the time in Milan, there was dispute among the presence of migrants and strangers, foreigners in the city. And in the mid 4th century, Ambrose said "Nothing is more shameful than to expel a man as a foreigner, and yet claim his services as though he belonged to us. They who would forbid the city to strangers cannot have our approval. They would expel them at the very time when they ought to help."

This passage from Luke, which is chosen for Ambrose, is not unlike the passage I preached on a couple of weeks ago from Matthew. It's this apocalyptic passage in the anthem today about keeping your lamps lit because echoes it nicely. And the lesson is, you don't know when Christ will come. And I think the tradition has been, to look forward in the future and think, "Oh, we don't know when Christ will come, but surely it will be at some point in the future." But I think for Ambrose, as for the Gospel of Matthew, as I preached a couple of weeks ago, this lesson is not an exhortation to project our attention to some point in the apocalyptic future, it's to direct our attention to the present.

These passages from Ambrose's own writing, where he saw Christ, was in the world around him, in the poor, in the stranger, in the outcast. Because as Matthew reminds us, that is where Christ is. And this is an especially important message, an advent, in this season when we wait for Christ, who by all gospel accounts, and by Ambrose's account too, already walks among us.

Please join me as we pray. The Lord be with you.

Congregation:

And also with you.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Let us pray. Oh God, who gave your servant Ambrose grace, eloquently to proclaim your righteousness in the great congregation, and fearlessly to bear reproach for the honor of your name. Mercifully grant, to all bishops and presbyters, such excellence in preaching, and faithfulness in ministering your word, that your people may be partakers with them of the glory that shall be revealed. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

And now, let's pray the words Jesus taught us, saying...

Congregation:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Please join us singing our closing hymn, number 109.

Congregation/Choir:

(singing)

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Glory to God, whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. Glory to God from generation to generation in the church, and in Christ Jesus, forever and ever. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Let us bless the Lord.

Congregation:

Thanks be to God.