



St Michael & All Angels, Chetwynd

The Collect for the Third Sunday of Advent

(Book of Common Prayer)

O Lord Jesu Christ, who at thy first coming didst send thy messenger to prepare thy way before thee: Grant that the ministers and stewards of thy mysteries may likewise so prepare and make ready thy way, by turning the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, that at thy second coming to judge the world, we may be found an acceptable people in thy sight, who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, world without end. Amen.

John Cosin (1594-1672) had been a member of “the Durham House” group in the time of Charles I, a high church party which included William Laud (the Archbishop of Canterbury). At the restoration of the monarchy in 1660 Charles II appointed him Bishop of Durham, and in 1661 Cosin became a key member of the Savoy Conference which was appointed to re-establish the Prayer Book. Quite a few amendments to the Prayer Book were composed by Cosin, including two Sunday collects, Epiphany 6 and this one which replaced a rather bland collect from the 1549 Prayer Book. Common Worship retains this collect for this Sunday (in modern English), but changing the phrase “the wisdom of the just” to “the law of love”.

The collect immediately captures our attention, because only three collects are addressed to Jesus. Cosin based his prayer on wording in the Epistle and Gospel for the day, established in the 1549 Prayer Book, and connecting with the tradition of recalling the ministry of John the Baptist in Advent. The Gospel (Matthew 11:1-10) has Jesus identifying John the Baptist as “*he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee*” (verse 10); the reference here is to Malachi 3:1a, “*Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me*”.

From Cosin’s perspective, there is a key role for the clergy. He equates “the ministers and stewards” in the collect with them; they are to continue in a role akin to John the Baptist’s, preparing the way for Christ. Cosin derives the phrase from the day’s Epistle, where Paul writes, “*Let a man so account of us, as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God*” (1 Corinthians 4:1). So far from elevating the status of church leaders, Paul in this passage is arguing that, in the light of the Corinthians’ claiming allegiance to different people, church leaders should be counted as of little importance.

The underlying word translated “ministers” means “under-rowers” or “galley-slaves”; and “stewards” were in Paul’s day usually slaves too. Church leaders are to be servants, not self-important. But they do need the prayerful support of the church, which this collect lends.

Advent means “coming”, and we saw in the collect for the first Sunday in Advent that we are invited to think both of Jesus’s first coming, as one who shares our human life, and of the promise of Jesus’s second coming. There is, though, a third strand to this expectation of Christ to come: he can come to us in the here and now. The role of John the Baptist, which the collect draws on, highlights this: he prepared the way for Jesus to come among his contemporaries. The collect encourages us to prepare for Jesus to come to us afresh, so that we re-adjust our lives, in the words of the collect, “to the wisdom of the just”, or the law of love.

James Graham, December 2025