

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER

The First Sunday in Adventⁱ

Lessons:

The First Lesson:ⁱⁱ Here beginneth the fourteenth Verse of the twenty-eighth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.ⁱⁱⁱ

“Wherefore hear the word of the LORD, ye scornful men, that rule this people which is in Jerusalem. Because ye have said, We have made a covenant with death, and with hell are we at agreement; when the overflowing scourge shall pass through, it shall not come unto us: for we have made lies our refuge, and under falsehood have we hid ourselves:

“Therefore thus saith {**SETH**} the Lord GOD, Behold, I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner stone, a sure foundation: he that believeth shall not make haste. Judgment also will I lay to the line, and righteousness to the plummet: and the hail shall sweep away the refuge of lies, and the waters shall overflow the hiding place.

“And your covenant with death shall be disannulled, and your agreement with hell shall not stand; when the overflowing scourge shall pass through, then ye shall be trodden down by it. From the time that it goeth forth it shall take you: for morning by morning shall it pass over, by day and by night: and it shall be a vexation only to understand the report. For the bed is shorter than that a man can stretch himself on it: and the covering narrower than that he can wrap himself in it. For the LORD shall rise up as in mount Perazim [**PARE-uh-zimm**], he shall be wroth as in the valley of Gibeon, that he may do his work, his strange work; and bring to pass his act, his strange act. Now therefore be ye not mockers, lest your bands be made strong: for I have heard from the Lord GOD of hosts a consumption, even determined upon the whole earth.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson:^{iv} Here beginneth the twenty-first Chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew.^v

“When they drew nigh unto Jerusalem, and were come to Bethphage [**BETH-fuh-dgee**], unto the mount of Olives, then sent Jesus two disciples, saying unto them, Go into the village over against you, and straightway ye shall find an ass tied, and a colt with her: loose them, and bring them unto me. And if any man say ought unto you, ye shall say, The Lord hath need of them; and straightway he will send them. All this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying, Tell ye the daughter of Sion, Behold, thy King cometh unto thee, meek, and sitting upon an ass, and a colt the foal of an ass. And the disciples went, and did as Jesus commanded them, and brought the ass, and the colt, and put on them their clothes, and they set him thereon. And a very great multitude spread their garments in the way; others cut down branches from the trees, and strawed them in the way. And the multitudes that went before, and that followed, cried, saying, Hosanna to the son of David: Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord; Hosanna in the highest. And when he was come into Jerusalem, all the city was moved, saying, Who is this? And the multitude said, This is Jesus the prophet of Nazareth of Galilee.

“And Jesus went into the temple of God, and cast out all them that sold and bought in the temple, and overthrew the tables of the money-changers, and the seats of them that sold doves, and said unto them, It is written, My house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Homily:

What a confusing choice for today’s Second Lesson, the same reading we have in the Blessing of the Palms on Palm Sunday, before the first Eucharist that day. What does this have to do with the main theme of Advent, that we must be prepared for the Second Coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in glory to judge both the quick and the dead? After all, as everyone should know, it is about our own real preparation to come face to face with God.

The season is about the Four Last Things, Death, Judgment, Heaven and Hell. Among these, Heaven and Hell take on powerful significance as the Resurrection to immortality, to live and reign with

Christ forever, and the resurrection of those who will go into the lake of fire. As the Lord said: *“Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation.”*^{vi}

In light of these themes, it is not enough to be aware of the joy that awaits those who will enter the blessed state of glorification as the sons of God. We must also be aware of the terror of the Lord so as to persuade men^{vii}, including ourselves, to be in a state of Grace at all times.

Several religious leaders from various churches must have voted, about a century or more ago, to close Hell. Like some prisons, it has perhaps become overcrowded, and so nobody else can go there, even though some people are dying to get in. Why else would it sound so strange to hear it mentioned in, of all places, a sermon in church?

Maybe Hell has become the sort of topic, like for example, sin; something that fashionable people just do not discuss in church. It's not nice, it's not warm and fuzzy, and it contributes, no doubt, to global warming. The problem is, the ultimate “fire and brimstone” preacher in the Bible is Jesus Christ—no more Mr. Nice Guy to anyone shocked to learn it. Yes, St. John the Baptist has a few words to say about it. St. Paul never mentions it directly, though clearly warning about it indirectly. Some theologians want to blunt the effect of every passage that does mention it.

If we are to be serious about the words of the Lord Jesus Christ, we must face this subject, namely, the danger of being lost forever, going into the outer darkness *“where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched.”*^{viii} The Greek word for that ultimate Hell is *Ge'enna* [**GEH-en-nah**] (γε'εννα). It refers to a terrible place mentioned in the Old Testament as a site where children were murdered in sacrifice to Molech [**MOE-leck**], the Valley of Ben-Hinnom [**ben-HINN-numb**]. In the First Century A.D., this place had become a dump, and trash was burned there day and night. In that dump the worm was kept alive, and fires were always burning.

And so our Lord spoke of it in terms of that final and dreadful verse in the Book of Isaiah: “*And they shall go forth, and look upon the carcasses of the men that have transgressed against me: for their worm shall not die, neither shall their fire be quenched; and they shall be an abhorring unto all flesh.*”^{ix} The terror of the Lord that ought to persuade each of us, and with which it is a mercy to persuade others, is that of being thrown away as the garbage.

No one need be thrown away, because God “*commandeth all men everywhere to repent.*”^x The Gospel command to repent is also a word of hope. It is centered on the grace of God, and the love of God demonstrated and revealed in the Cross of Christ.^{xi} How simple and yet powerful are those words of St. Paul, “*Christ died for our sins.*”^{xii} In that light, we obey the command to repent, and therefore are filled with joy because He gives us the certain hope of eternal life.

“*Repent, confess, thou shalt be loosed from all.*”^{xiii} This alone gives hope. A false gospel of acceptance and inclusion cannot revive and comfort anyone’s conscience. The words of today’s Epistle tell us how to live our lives in this world in the fear of God, and also in the grace of God: “*The night is far spent, the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light.*”

Why are we given *this* selection from the Gospels? Why this picture of Christ being welcomed as the Son of David, the king, and then getting off the donkey, going into the temple, and casting out the money changers? We understand why this leads to the Passion, and is read at the start of Holy Week when we bless the palms. We understand that other judgment, that in the Cross of Christ it was the Prince of this world who was judged and cast out.^{xiv} When we begin Holy Week it makes sense.

What, however, does this have to do with the coming again in glory of our Lord Jesus Christ, to judge the quick and the dead? As an event in history, how do we place some meaning of it in the future? as a recorded past event, how does it find its way into eschatology [**ESS-kah-TAHL-uh-dgee**], the study of the End?

The simple answer (so obvious once we realize it) is that, in her wisdom, the Church puts before our eyes this picture of our Lord Jesus Christ, from His first coming, that most closely resembles His second coming. Here is the Lord who suddenly comes to His temple and cleanses it. We see the Lord who casts out from the place of that holy presence of the *Shekinah*^{xv} [*shih-KYE-nuh*], those who have been living unrepentant in sin. The authority of the Lord, to mete out judgment, to evict sinners from his presence, to cleanse, to purge, and to purify, is seen in this Gospel passage.

That harder side of the One who was able to forgive and heal with compassion is here made visible. This picture shows the judgment of the Lord; it shows His unique authority as the Word and Son of the Everlasting Father, that power that comes so genuinely from within Himself that all of these men felt compelled to obey His voice, and had no power in themselves to resist His words of eviction from the Holy Place.

He had no visible army to carry out His commands, no soldiers to enforce His decree; and yet His power was such that no one could resist, and no one could refuse. Just as He had power to cast out demons so that people would not be tormented any longer, so His word with power casts out the money changers. Yes, this is the best picture we have of the Lord coming again as Judge.

St. Peter wrote: *“For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God: and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God? And if the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?”*^{xvi} If we submit to the work of the Holy Spirit among us, we will experience that gentle judgment that saves us here and now.

After all, even though St. Peter makes direct reference to the End, that is the Last Day when Christ comes again, and does so with words to place the fear of God in our hearts, he begins with *“the time is come.”* If the message is about *“the end”* of those who are removed, thrown into the dump of *Ge’enna* with its hungry worms and perpetual burnings, what judgment is there that begins *now* in the house of God?

Jesus cast out the works of darkness from the house of God, the Temple in Jerusalem, casting out those who had worked that darkness openly and unashamed, and who insulted the holy place no less than the sons of Eli had done long before.^{xvii} But St. Peter urges us with a present hope: “*For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God.*” What is this judgment that must begin now? Pray God, let it be for each one of us the very self-examination that aids those who repent to make a good confession of their sins with all of the sincerity of a heart moved by the Holy Spirit.

What do we plan to do at every service of the Church at which a priest is present? What follows every sermon in a Mass? Before I supply the answer, let us recall that other name, that specifically Anglican name that we give to such services: “The Holy Communion.” Other names are good too, such as the Divine Liturgy (the Eastern Orthodox name), and the Holy Eucharist. But I like the Anglican name, *The Holy Communion*. It was first used to make something very clear to the people of the Church of England, which is that the purpose for which Christ instituted this sacrament of His Body and Blood is to be taken and received.

The Catechism tells us that two of the Sacraments are *generally* necessary for salvation, Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. The purpose of coming here and receiving this Blessed Sacrament is to feed on the Living Bread that comes down from heaven, which if a man eat, he may live forever. Jesus told us that He is the food and drink of eternal life, and to eat His flesh and drink his blood.^{xviii} First we make confession of sin based on the self-examination we should make every time; as St. Paul wrote: “*But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup.*”^{xix}

It is in that self-examination and the *resulting* sincere confession, that we prepare for the coming of the Lord right now, that is, His coming to our altar, and then into our very bodies as we eat the food and drink the cup of eternal life-His flesh and blood. If we live always ready for this Sacrament, we will live always ready to meet the Lord face to face.

In today’s Second Lesson, we see important elements of His Second Coming, elements that are true to the Person of the Son of God,

the everlasting Son of the everlasting Father. He is the only king and savior. He is the judge “*Whose fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly purge his floor, and gather His wheat into the garner; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.*”^{xx} Judgment will begin at the House of God, until His whole creation is cleansed and purified, made ready for a habitation of His righteousness, a dwelling place of His glory among men.

The purpose of a Penitential season is to learn to sharpen and focus our self-examination, the same self-examination that we should do every time we draw near to receive the Body and Blood of Christ. I know that a “feel good” religion is the popular model for success in today’s “spiritual” market; but the only good feeling we should ever trust is that spoken of by the Psalmist: “*Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.*”^{xxi}

To be ready for the last Judgment, we must be willing to let the Holy Ghost shake up our world, we must allow Him to shake up our very selves. Indeed, to prepare for the coming again of Jesus Christ, we must draw near “with hearty repentance and true faith” in order to make a good confession, sincere and resolute of purpose to “walk in newness of life.” Indeed, to prepare for the coming again of Jesus Christ, we need do no more, and no less, than we do when we prepare to receive the Communion of His Body and Blood.^{xxii}

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ⁱ *This sermon was originally written on the Gospel at Mass on the First Sunday in Advent, 2011.*

ⁱⁱ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER x (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*

ⁱⁱⁱ *Isaiah 28:14-22 (KJV).*

^{iv} *The Collects, Epistles, and Gospels To be used throughout the year, The Book of Common Prayer 91-92 (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943). “Upon any Sunday or Holy Day, the Minister may read the Epistle or the Gospel of the Day in place of the*

Second Lesson at Morning or Evening Prayer.” Concerning the Service of the Church, op. cit. viii.

^v *St. Matthew 21:1-13 (KJV).*

^{vi} *St. John 5:28-29 (KJV).*

^{vii} *II Corinthians 5:11.*

^{viii} *St. Mark 9:42-50 (KJV).*

^{ix} *Isaiah 66:24 (KJV).*

^x *Acts 17:30 (KJV).*

^{xi} *Romans 5:8.*

^{xii} *I Corinthians 15:3 (KJV).*

^{xiii} *From Weary of Earth and laden with my sin, Hymn 58 in The Hymnal 1940.*

^{xiv} *St. John 12:31-32.*

^{xv} *The overwhelming shining light that is the “Glory” of God, that is, that signals His presence. Cf., e.g., Acts 9:3.*

^{xvi} *I Peter 4:17, 18 (KJV).*

^{xvii} *I Samuel 2:12 ff (KJV).*

^{xviii} *St. John 6:26-59 (KJV).*

^{xix} *I Corinthians 11: 29 (KJV).*

^{xx} *Matthew. 3:12 (KJV).*

^{xxi} *Psalm 32:1 (KJV).*

^{xxii} *I Corinthians 10:16*

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