

Sermon for Morning Prayer
The Sunday Second Before Advent
(Trinity XXVI, 2008)

Lessons:

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the sixth Verse of the second Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.¹

“Therefore thou hast forsaken thy people the house of Jacob, because they be replenished from the east, and are soothsayers like the Philistines [**FILL-es-teenz**], and they please themselves in the children of strangers. Their land also is full of silver and gold, neither is there any end of their treasures; their land is also full of horses, neither is there any end of their chariots: Their land also is full of idols; they worship the work of their own hands, that which their own fingers have made: And the mean man boweth down, and the great man humbleth himself: therefore forgive them not.

“Enter into the rock, and hide thee in the dust, for fear of the Lord, and for the glory of his majesty. The lofty looks of man shall be humbled, and the haughtiness of men shall be bowed down, and the Lord alone shall be exalted in that day. For the day of the Lord of hosts shall be upon every one that is proud and lofty, and upon every one that is lifted up; and he shall be brought low: And upon all the cedars of Lebanon [**LEB-uh-nun**], that are high and lifted up, and upon all the oaks of Bashan [**BAH-shan**], And upon all the high mountains, and upon all the hills that are lifted up, And upon every high tower, and upon every fenced wall, And upon all the ships of Tarshish [**TAR-shish**], and upon all pleasant pictures. And the loftiness of man shall be bowed down, and the haughtiness of men shall be made low: and the Lord alone shall be exalted in that day. And the idols he shall utterly abolish. And they shall go into the holes of the rocks, and into the caves of the earth, for fear of the Lord, and for the glory of his majesty, when he ariseth to shake terribly the earth.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the fourteenth Verse of the twenty-fifth Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Matthew.

“For the kingdom of heaven is as a man travelling into a far country, who called his own servants, and delivered unto them his goods. And unto one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one; to every man according to his several ability; and straightway took his journey. Then he that had received the five talents went and traded with the same, and made them other five talents. And likewise he that had received two, he also gained other two. But he that had received one went and digged in the earth, and hid his lord’s money. After a long time the lord of those servants cometh, and reckoneth with them. And so he that had received five talents came and brought other five talents, saying, Lord, thou deliveredst unto me five talents: behold, I have gained beside them five talents more. His lord said unto him, Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord. He also that had received two talents came and said, Lord, thou deliveredst unto me two talents: behold, I have gained two other talents beside them. His lord said unto him, Well done, good and faithful servant; thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord. Then he which had received the one talent came and said, Lord, I knew thee that thou art an hard man, reaping where thou hast not sown, and gathering where thou hast not strawed: And I was afraid, and went and hid thy talent in the earth: lo, there thou hast that is thine. His lord answered and said unto him, Thou wicked and slothful servant, thou knewest that I reap where I sowed not, and gather where I have not strawed: Thou oughtest therefore to have put my money to the exchangers, and then at my coming I should have received mine own with usury. Take therefore the talent from him, and give it unto him which hath ten talents. For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the First Lesson: “Their land also is full of idols; they worship the work of their own hands, that which their own fingers have made: And the mean man boweth down, and the great man humbleth himself: therefore forgive them not.”ⁱⁱ

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

Introduction:

Today's First Lesson from Isaiah is a prophecy of the coming of Christ's Kingdom and, with it, the destruction of idol worship. In our "modern", Western society, when we read any of the many passages in the Old Testament that denounce the worship of idols, they usually seem to be mere quaint survivals of times bygone for several millennia.

Perhaps some of us have seen actual idols, hidden away as archaeological artifacts in museum collections, but those are scarcely evidence of any living religious movement, let alone threat. The religions they represented are long dead. Perhaps a few of us have seen, and more of us have seen pictures, of statues of the Buddha, but those are merely "sights" for tourists in exotic Oriental vacation spots.

But these things are not live aspects of our society so the whole issue of idols is, for us, a not a real issue. Except for one thing. Remember the Old Testament, which is, from one perspective, nothing more than the long chronicle of the recurring apostasies of the ancient Hebrews. Time after time, they abandoned the worship of the true God and went, in the curious Jacobean phrase, "a whoring after the gods of the strangers of the land".ⁱⁱⁱ Then God would send yet one more prophet to recall them to their Covenant obligations, and the whole dreary process would begin again.

Looked at this way, the Old Testament is simply the best soap opera ever written, chock full of scheming, back-stabbing, evil characters, adultery, and all the other trappings of modern "daytime" entertainment. Just think: what vixen in "As the World Churns" or "The Young and the Feckless" could ever measure up to the original scheming female lead, Queen Jezebel?

Theme:

Unfortunately, that tendency to turn away from God to go off in pursuit of other, more seductive, and less demanding gods is not a thing of the past. It is a permanent part of the human condition and we must always be on our guard to avoid being distracted and led away in just the same ways as were the old Israelites.

The principle difference in our time is that the idols most prevalent today either conceal their physical appearances so that we do not recognize them as idols or, even more dangerously, appear among us in intangible forms, not physical ones, so we are even less likely to recognize their true nature as idols.

Development:

- 1. One effective way to lead people away from the true God to worship idols is to alter those idols' physical presence to some seemingly innocuous form that conceals their nature as false gods.**

Picture a man coming up to me, who shows me a picture or a statue of an idol. Then he tells me that this is the statue of the god of popularity and celebrity. If I worship this particular god, with all my heart, I will have the respect and appreciation of all my friends and neighbors, in fact, of everyone who sees me. Everyone will treat me as a man of wealth and power, my words will be listened to, my name will be recognized wherever I go, and I will be one of the important people in our society. All this, just for worshipping this particular idol.

Sounds ridiculous, does it not? Who would ever be so silly as to make a crass and transparent approach like that, an approach that would be sure to be rejected with laughter and scorn?

Well, that approach is made thousands of times a day in our society and in a very high percentage of those cases, it is successful. Just look at any TV show or in any glossy magazine. There, one after another, are advertisements that subtly but clearly say, “People who wear our brand of clothes or perfume are sexy and successful” or, “You are what you drive, so drive our brand of car” or, “Live in this particular neighborhood and you will be one of the people who count for something”.

But, you may say, people who buy particular “luxury” or “prestige” goods do not *worship* them. Well, friends, if you had sat where I sat for many years, counseling people who have been forced to the brink of bankruptcy, you would have seen how desperately they cling to these things that they think are essential to their personal images. Nor is the idol always something you or I would recognize as a luxury or prestige item, it needs only to be something that a particular person’s social group prizes or that he or she has taken into himself or herself and made a part of his or her personal image.

It is hard to overstate the force of this compulsion. I will never forget telling a retired man that he could not file a bankruptcy case and expect to keep two automobiles, one for himself and one for his wife, along with a pickup truck. He would be fortunate if he could keep both cars, I told him, but the truck had to go. He was completely over-extended, could not pay his bills on his fixed income, and desperately needed to hang onto his house to keep a roof over himself and his wife, he needed to file bankruptcy, but no bankruptcy trustee could avoid taking that truck.

Did these priorities phase him at all? Did they make him reevaluate his situation, to see what was really important to him? On the contrary, he snatched up his papers and stormed out of my office, shouting “A man’s gotta have his pickup truck!”

What do you think was that man’s idol, his god?

- 2. A second way to lead people away from the true God to worship idols is to present them to us in *intangible* forms so we do not recognize them as idols.**

If you are sitting here listening to this sermon, you are certainly at least open to the idea that “The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in the which the pure Word of God is preached, and the sacraments be duly administered according to Christ’s ordinance, in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same.”^{iv}

And if I stood before you and announced that this church was no longer going to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and that we were going to downplay the Sacraments in favor of secular preoccupations, you would probably sense that something was amiss. But what if, instead of announcing anything like that, we just started doing it? What if our sermons gradually stopped speaking to you of the sovereignty and majesty of God, of the horrible risks of sin, and of God’s overwhelming love for us and of Christ’s almost unimaginable sacrifice for us?

Instead of those traditional topics, we could simply start telling you about the church’s importance in bringing all sorts of good things into being. These would all sound like, and would often be, good things, mind you, even if they were somewhat vaguely defined. Things such as social justice, the relief of poverty, the end of wars, the easing of hatreds between individuals and groups. All those would sound like desirable things that the church ought to promote, would they not?

And what would happen after twenty or thirty years of such teaching, years during which little or nothing was said about issues such as the “Four Last Things: Death, Judgement, Heaven, and Hell”?

What would happen would be precisely what has happened among all too many “main stream” churches. They, and their members, now see themselves as social service agencies, motivating their members to vote for and to give money to certain selected causes and objects such as the United Nations’ “Millennium Development Goals”.^v But rarely, if ever, does one hear in those places anything about the depravity of humankind, our utter inability to help ourselves without God’s Grace, or God’s merciful provision for our salvation.

What do you think are the intangible idols, the gods that have come to be worshipped in those places, places that were supposed to be temples of the one, true God?

3. A third way to lead people away from the true God to worship idols is to encourage the worshippers' instinctive tendency to move themselves away from God, that is, to commit sins.

When the Church speaks to its members and to the world about the topics on which the church has some special expertise, such as Original Sin, Conversion, and Repentance, it tends to make them feel uncomfortable. People just naturally tend to avoid anything that makes them uncomfortable, that requires them to take a hard look at themselves, that requires them to think about things they would just as soon ignore.

So a “leader” who wishes to have a major television “ministry”, or a congregation that wishes to grow to having ten thousand members, is not likely to achieve those goals if he, or it, makes people uncomfortable, makes them conscious of their own besetting sins, demands that they repent. It is much easier to tell people that they are already saved, that they are just fine as they are right now, that they need not expend any great effort working out their salvation in fear and trembling.

Instead, they can be told that all they have to do is recite some little mantra, such as, “Lord Jesus, I accept you as my Lord and Savior!” and then everything will be taken care of. This type of “feel good” “ministry” builds monster congregations, wealthy organizations, and puts thousand-dollar suits on its leaders, just because it makes no intellectual or moral demands on its constituents.

That is a subtle way to undermine the Gospel message and to replace the one, true God with an empty idol. A more extreme version of the same process is to go farther and teach the people that the demanding messages of the old religion simply no longer apply to them. There are three principle methods now being used in, and by, the society around us to undercut the old religion.

One of these ways of deconstructing God is to say that the sources of our religion, such as Scripture, simply do not say what the Church has always read them to mean. One current example of this is when senior leaders of major denominations state in public that the Old Testament account of God's judgement on Sodom and Gomorrah was not a critique of homosexual behavior but, instead, punishment for violation of the ancient Near Eastern code of hospitality.

Another is to say that while the sources of the old religion, such as Scripture, do indeed say what they have always been understood to say, the ancient peoples who wrote down those Scriptures did not have a complete understanding of the scientific realities underlying the issues about which they wrote. Thus, according to this argument, while the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, and other explicit passages in the Old Testament, may indeed denounce homosexual behavior, the people who wrote down those accounts were unaware of modern discoveries such as that homosexuality is an "orientation", whatever that means, and not a behavioral choice. Thus their disapproval of such practices was based in incomplete information and we, who are better informed, are free to reevaluate, and reject, what they passed down to us.

A third, and even more insidious way to accomplish the same thing is to concentrate on one issue which is actually a part of the Christian message and to emphasize that one part to the exclusion of all the other, inconvenient parts. Thus, for example, some teach only that Christ came to show God's love for humanity and, therefore, because He loves us, He will make no unpleasant demands on us. If we stray into what used to be called "sin", Christ will never correct us or ask us to repent and amend our ways because He "loves" us in the same way a dysfunctional parent does, spoiling the children by indulging all of their immature impulses and desires.

Whichever of these techniques is being employed at any given time, and sometimes several of them are in use at once, the result is to move the one, true, but unpleasantly demanding God from the focus of our sight and to push Him into the background of a colorful, enticing scene. Then we can easily be led – or, often, will lead ourselves – to worship our own drives and instincts, to set ourselves up as our own idols.

Conclusion:

So we must always be on guard to insulate ourselves against these distortions and distractions. Perhaps the simplest way to do this is frequently to remember those four basic topics that, earlier, we said are never part of the new forms of evangelism: “Four Last Things: Death, Judgement, Heaven, and Hell”.

If we are truly conscious that one day, each of us must die, and if we actually believe that, once we die, we will face a real Judgement on how we lived our lives here on earth, then we must also be acutely aware of the realities of Heaven and Hell. And if we are aware that those two possibilities define the alternatives for the ultimate fate of each of us, then we may be readier to accept what today’s First Lesson said about the coming of the Lord:

“Enter into the rock, and hide thee in the dust, for fear of the Lord, and for the glory of his majesty. The lofty looks of man shall be humbled, and the haughtiness of men shall be bowed down, and the Lord alone shall be exalted in that day. For the day of the Lord of hosts shall be upon every one that is proud and lofty, and upon every one that is lifted up; and he shall be brought low....”^{vi}

--oo0oo--

The Rev’d Canon John A. Hollister^{vii}
November 16, 2008.

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

ⁱⁱ *Isaiah 2: 8-9 (KJV).*

ⁱⁱⁱ *Deuteronomy 31: 16 (KJV). Cf. Leviticus 20: 2-5.*

^{iv} *Article XIX “Of the Church”, Articles of Religion, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 606 (PECUSA 1928).*

^v *For Lent, 2008, the national office of PECUSA circulated a suggested service of “Stations of the Cross” in which the traditional fourteen stations on Our Lord’s journey to the Passion were replaced by the U.N.’s Millennium Development Goals.*

^{vi} *Isaiah 2: 10-12 (KJV).*

^{vii} *Priest Assistant, Christ Anglican Catholic Church, Metairie LA. Honorary Canon, the Diocese of the Resurrection, and Honorary Canon and Canon to the Ordinary, The Diocese of New Orleans, The Anglican Catholic Church.*