

Sermon for Evening Prayerⁱ
The Third Sunday Before Advent
(Trinity XXIII, 2010)

I. Lessons:ⁱⁱ

A. The First Lesson: Here beginneth the ninth Verse of the third Chapter of Joel.ⁱⁱⁱ

“Proclaim ye this among the Gentiles; Prepare war, wake up the mighty men, let all the men of war draw near; let them come up: Beat your plowshares into swords, and your pruninghooks into spears: let the weak say, I am strong. Assemble yourselves, and come, all ye heathen, and gather yourselves together round about: thither cause thy mighty ones to come down, O LORD. Let the heathen be wakened, and come up to the valley of Jehoshaphat: for there will I sit to judge all the heathen round about. Put ye in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe: come, get you down; for the press is full, the vats overflow; for their wickedness is great. Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision: for the day of the LORD is near in the valley of decision. The sun and the moon shall be darkened, and the stars shall withdraw their shining. The LORD also shall roar out of Zion, and utter his voice from Jerusalem; and the heavens and the earth shall shake: but the LORD will be the hope of his people, and the strength of the children of Israel. So shall ye know that I am the LORD your God dwelling in Zion, my holy mountain: then shall Jerusalem be holy, and there shall no strangers pass through her any more.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

B. The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the thirty-sixth Verse of the thirteenth Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Matthew.^{iv}

“... Then Jesus sent the multitude away, and went into the house: and his disciples came unto him, saying, Declare unto us the parable of the tares of the field. He answered and said unto them, He that soweth the good seed is the Son of man; The field is the world; the good seed are the children of the kingdom; but the tares are the children of the wicked one; The enemy that sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the

end of the world; and the reapers are the angels. As therefore the tares are gathered and burned in the fire; so shall it be in the end of this world. The Son of man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity; And shall cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth. Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Who hath ears to hear, let him hear.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto treasure hid in a field; the which when a man hath found, he hideth, and for joy thereof goeth and selleth all that he hath, and buyeth that field.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchant man, seeking goodly pearls: Who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had, and bought it.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a net, that was cast into the sea, and gathered of every kind: Which, when it was full, they drew to shore, and sat down, and gathered the good into vessels, but cast the bad away. So shall it be at the end of the world: the angels shall come forth, and sever the wicked from among the just, And shall cast them into the furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth. Jesus saith unto them, Have ye understood all these things? They say unto him, Yea, Lord. Then said he unto them, Therefore every scribe which is instructed unto the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is an householder, which bringeth forth out of his treasure things new and old.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

II. Text:

From the Second Lesson: “The Son of man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and throw them into the furnace of fire; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.”^v In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

III. Introduction:

Today's Second Lesson comes in the middle of a longer discourse that contains a number of parables. These, like most true parables, are lessons about the nature and operation of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Today's Lesson itself comes after, among others, two famous and related parables. The first is that of the sower, who strewed his seeds onto rocky ground as well as good and among thorns as well as on clear ground, and, regardless of where they fell, some of whose seeds were immediately eaten by the birds.^{vi} The second is that of the farmer whose enemy secretly sowed weeds among the good grain and who told his servants to wait until the harvest to separate the grain from the weeds and then to burn the weeds.^{vii}

IV. Theme:

The Lesson opens with Our Lord's explanation to his disciples of the meaning of those parables. In the first parable, the sower of the seeds is the Son of God; the world is the world; the good seed means those who follow Christ.^{viii} In the second parable, the farmer is God; the sower of the weeds is Satan; the weeds are the followers of this evil one; the harvest is the end of time; and the harvesters are God's angels who accompany Christ to the Judgement.^{ix}

V. Development:

The two verses that I have taken as the text for this sermon come from the end of that explanation and reiterate that farmer's instructions to his field hands. They are to refrain from trying to root out the newly-planted weeds, lest they confuse good grain with those weeds and pluck out just what it was the farmer was trying to grow. Instead, they must let the grain and the weeds grow up together, until by harvest time they can easily be distinguished, one from the other.

This explanation relies on a bit of Biblical arcane, with which Christ's listeners would have been familiar but which is rather foreign to us. It is that in the Holy Land, there was – and for all I know, may still be – a particular weed called the darnel plant.^x In the early stages of its growth, the darnel looks almost exactly like the grain, so the two are

very difficult to distinguish one from the other. When the plants are mature, however, the darnel does not have the heavy cluster of seeds that marks the grain and so the two may safely be told apart.

What is often overlooked when we read these parables, with their agricultural metaphors, is that in each of them it is only after the natural cycle of growth has completed itself that we can tell the results of these efforts. The sower can only see which seeds survived and thrived after he sees where, and how much of, the crop is growing. The farmer can only tell the good grain from the weeds after each has grown enough to show its essential characteristics.

Recall the verses I took as the text for this sermon: “The Son of man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and throw them into the furnace of fire; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.”^{xi} This is the Judgement but, firstly, that Judgement comes only at the end of time and, secondly, that Judgement is made by Christ and His angels. This last point is similar to that made in another famous image of the Judgement, where the shepherd who stands at the gate of the sheepfold as the animals run out, directing the sheep to one side and the goats to the other.^{xii}

VI. Conclusion:

For us, as Christians, these are the two observations we should take away from this Lesson. The first is that the separation of the grain from the weeds, of the Sons of God from the Sons of Belial, will take place only at the end of time. Until then, we all grow together in the same field, that is, in this world. It is only at the end that the good will be culled from the bad, so we must not rush to judgement upon anyone.

In the meantime, until it has shown its ultimate development, who of us knows whether a particular stalk is good grain or bad darnel? Living in the same world, and even in the same Church, as some who appear to us liable to be classified as weeds is just part of the price we pay for our own opportunities to grow into righteousness. We ourselves need the grace of time to grow and perfect ourselves just as much as they do.

There is one important point about that, however: “judgement” in this sense means forming a conclusion about how God will deal with someone’s ultimate fate; it does not mean that we are not to exercise ordinary prudence and good stewardship in protecting ourselves and our loved ones from the malefactors of this world.

Related to that is the second observation we should take away with us. It is that when the time comes for the ultimate Judgement to be made, it will be Our Lord and His angels who cull the good from the bad, not we who are ourselves the subjects of that culling. We must concentrate on improving ourselves during our own personal journeys in this world; we can safely leave the fate of others to the Lord.

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November 7, 2010.

ⁱ “Any set of Psalms and Lessons appointed for the evening of any day may be read at the morning service, and any set of morning Psalms and Lessons may be read in the evening.” *Concerning the Service of the Church, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER* viii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

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

ⁱⁱⁱ *Joel 3: 9-17 (KJV).*

^{iv} *St. Matthew 13: 36-52 (KJV).*

^v *St. Matthew 13: 41-42 (RSV).*

^{vi} *St. Matthew 13: 3-9.*

^{vii} *St. Matthew 13: 24-30.*

^{viii} *St. Matthew 13: 37-38a.*

^{ix} *St. Matthew 13: 38b-39.*

^x *R. E. Nixon, Matthew, in D. GUTHRIE AND J. A. MOTYER, THE NEW BIBLE COMMENTARY REVISED, 3rd Ed. 834 (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company 1970).*

^{xi} *St. Matthew 13: 41-42 (RSV).*

^{xii} *St. Matthew 25: 31-46.*

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