

## Sermon for Evening Prayer<sup>i</sup> The Third Sunday in Advent

### Lessons:<sup>ii</sup>

**The First Lesson:** Here beginneth the third Verse of the first Chapter of Nahum.<sup>iii</sup>

“... The LORD is slow to anger, and great in power, and will not at all acquit the wicked: the LORD hath his way in the whirlwind and in the storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet. He rebuketh the sea, and maketh it dry, and drieth up all the rivers: Bashan [BEH-shan] languisheth, and Carmel, and the flower of Lebanon languisheth. The mountains quake at him, and the hills melt, and the earth is burned at his presence, yea, the world, and all that dwell therein. Who can stand before his indignation? and who can abide in the fierceness of his anger? his fury is poured out like fire, and the rocks are thrown down by him. The LORD is good, a strong hold in the day of trouble; and he knoweth them that trust in him. But with an overrunning flood he will make an utter end of the place thereof, and darkness shall pursue his enemies.... Behold upon the mountains the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace! O Judah, keep thy solemn feasts, perform thy vows: for the wicked shall no more pass through thee; he is utterly cut off.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

**The Second Lesson:** Here beginneth the seventh Verse of the ninth Chapter of the First Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians.<sup>iv</sup>

“... Who goeth a warfare any time at his own charges? who planteth a vineyard, and eateth not of the fruit thereof? or who feedeth a flock, and eateth not of the milk of the flock? Say I these things as a man? or saith [SETH] not the law the same also? For it is written in the law of Moses, Thou shalt not muzzle the mouth of the ox that treadeth out the corn. Doth God take care for oxen? Or saith [SETH] he it altogether for our sakes? For our sakes, no doubt, this is written: that he that ploweth should plow in hope; and that he that thresheth in hope

should be partaker of his hope. If we have sown unto you spiritual things, is it a great thing if we shall reap your carnal things? If others be partakers of this power over you, are not we rather? Nevertheless we have not used this power; but suffer all things, lest we should hinder the gospel of Christ. Do ye not know that they which minister about holy things live of the things of the temple? and they which wait at the altar are partakers with the altar? Even so hath the Lord ordained that they which preach the gospel should live of the gospel. But I have used none of these things: neither have I written these things, that it should be so done unto me: for it were better for me to die, than that any man should make my glorying void. For though I preach the gospel, I have nothing to glory of: for necessity is laid upon me; yea, woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel! For if I do this thing willingly, I have a reward: but if against my will, a dispensation of the gospel is committed unto me. What is my reward then? Verily that, when I preach the gospel, I may make the gospel of Christ without charge, that I abuse not my power in the gospel. For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more. And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; To them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law. To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. And this I do for the gospel's sake, that I might be partaker thereof with you.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

**Text:**

From the Second Lesson: “Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings? In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.”<sup>v</sup> In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

**Homily:**

If you are hearing this sermon being preached, then you are almost certainly sitting in a congregation that is celebrating Morning or Evening Prayer under the leadership of a lay reader because a clergyman is not available to you. If you are fortunate, this lack of clergy will be only for a Sunday or two, while your regular deacon or priest is ill, or on vacation, or absent serving somewhere else.

But in all too many cases, your regular Sunday fare is one of the “choir offices”<sup>vi</sup> and the visit of a clergyman, and with it the opportunity to receive sacramental Communion, is a comparatively rare privilege. So, in the view from the pew, it often seems as though the Continuing Churches have a shortage of clergy.

We certainly have a shortage of clergy who are, or who can be, placed where we most need them to serve; our empty pulpits and struggling missions are sufficient testimony to that. But it is an open question whether we have a shortage in absolute numbers. That is, it may well be that our problem is one of our *deployment* of clergy rather than one of our *procurement* of them.

To put it another way, it is entirely possible that we have enough clergy to meet our overall needs; after all, in almost all our dioceses, the Commissions on Ministry have a small but continuous stream of postulants going through the training and formation process. Almost certainly, on a *per capita* basis, we have no difficulty in producing more effective vocations to the clergy than do, for example, our brothers and sisters in the Roman Church.

But if this is so, if we are indeed producing a sufficient number, or even a nearly sufficient number, of clergymen, why are they not serving the congregations that now do not have a resident deacon or priest? The answer, I suggest to you, is that they are not so serving because, under current conditions, the bishops cannot move most of them from the places where they are presently residing to the places where there are congregations most in need of their services.

And the reason why the bishops cannot do this is very simple: the bishops cannot assure those men of stipends adequate to support themselves and their families in some sort of decency.

All too often, we see an advertisement by a Continuing Church parish or mission that is seeking a priest who will celebrate according to the 1928 Book of Common Prayer but who also has no need of that parish or mission's support. Sometimes this is couched as a desire for a man who will make that congregation grow and so will someday reap the benefits of an enlarged parish budget; sometimes it is phrased as the search for a retired military veteran or civil servant whose government pension will free him from any need for the congregation's support.

Of course, such a parish or mission is also usually willing to accept a man whose wife has a career of her own and who is prepared to subsidize that congregation out of her earnings. However it may be put, however, the intent is clear: this is a congregation that is looking for a man who, in effect, will pay for the privilege of celebrating the Sacraments for it. And in the end, that congregation usually gets precisely what it is willing to pay for, that is, it gets nothing.

There is the additional problem that this mindset creates for the overall Church. A disproportionate number of our postulants for ordination are men who are at least in midlife; many of them are already retired. While their maturity and experience are of great value in their ministries, as a group these men have relatively fewer years left in which to serve the Church when compared with younger men who are just embarking on their lives' work. That means we must invest proportionately more in the training and formation of these older men than we do in that of the younger ones, for we have fewer years over which to amortize those investments.

However, we will not be able to persuade any great number of young men to enter seminary right out of college, and to prepare themselves to spend their entire working lives in the ministry, unless we can assure them of sufficient financial support for themselves and their families, of reasonable health insurance, and of an adequate pension at the end of their service. And to this point, the Continuing Churches simply have not done this.

This is one of those “good news, bad news” stories. The good news is that we do, indeed, have enough money to give our clergy the sort of economic security that would encourage well-educated young men to pursue clerical vocations. The bad news is that the money in question is not presently residing in any church account at any bank but, instead, is still jingling around in the pockets of our members.

Look around you at the denominations and congregations that are growing most visibly and you will almost always find that these are the same groups whose members routinely tithe. And by “tithe” I do not mean the occasional dollar bill, or even five dollar bill, or even the occasional twenty, dropped into the collection plate of a Sunday morning; I am referring to the full Biblical one-tenth of one’s gross income.

I live in the Deep South of the United States, so I am surrounded by Southern Baptists and various flavors of Pentecostals and Assemblies of God. All of those groups preach tithing as an article of faith and almost all of their members treat that Biblical demand as an article of faith. And these are the very groups that are so visibly growing. Do you think there could be a connection there?

I well recall a conversation I had with Father Muse Davis more than twenty years ago. He, too, lives in another Southern state, is similarly surrounded by tithing congregations, and at the time of which I am thinking was a layman struggling to begin a mission in his home town, with no thought of himself pursuing Holy Orders. I will slightly paraphrase his remark to me: “If Anglicans only tithed, then ten families could support a priest at the average income level of that congregation, and twenty families could support a priest, a building, and the usual programs of a successful parish.”

Just think of that: a thriving, active, economically secure parish of sixty or so people. And we could have one of those in almost any town or city where we were willing to do what is necessary to build it and maintain it.

**Conclusion:**

Ever since I heard Father Davis' vision, so simple in concept and so difficult to put into practice, I have been unable to forget it: A thriving, active, economically secure parish of sixty or so people in any town or city where we wished to plant one.

So it is with that vision in mind that I ask you, as St. Paul asked the Corinthians, "Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings? In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel."<sup>vii</sup>

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The Rev'd Canon John A. Hollister<sup>viii</sup>  
December 12, 2010.

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<sup>i</sup> "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).

<sup>ii</sup> *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER* xi (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

<sup>iii</sup> *Nahum 1: 3-8, 15 (KJV).*

<sup>iv</sup> *I Corinthians 9: 7-23 (KJV).*

<sup>v</sup> *I Corinthians 9: 13-14 (RSV).*

<sup>vi</sup> *I.e., Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer, the Litany, and the Penitential Office, so called because in a church which is configured in the Medieval style they are celebrated "in choir", between the nave and the sanctuary, rather than at the altar.*

<sup>vii</sup> *I Corinthians 9: 13-14 (RSV).*

<sup>viii</sup> *Priest Assistant, Christ Anglican Catholic Church, Metairie LA; Honorary Canon, the Diocese of the Resurrection; Honorary Canon and Canon to the Ordinary, The Diocese of New Orleans, The Anglican Catholic Church.*