

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER

The First Sunday after Easter (“Low Sunday”)

Lessons:¹

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the twenty-third Verse of the second Chapter of the Wisdom of Solomon.²

“... For God created man to be immortal, and made him to be an image of his own eternity. Nevertheless through envy of the devil came death into the world: and they that do hold of his side do find it.

“But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and there shall no torment touch them. In the sight of the unwise they seemed to die: and their departure is taken for misery, And their going from us to be utter destruction: but they are in peace. For though they be punished in the sight of men, yet is their hope full of immortality. And having been a little chastised, they shall be greatly rewarded: for God proved them, and found them worthy for himself. As gold in the furnace hath he tried them, and received them as a burnt offering. And in the time of their visitation they shall shine, and run to and fro like sparks among the stubble. They shall judge the nations, and have dominion over the people, and their Lord shall reign for ever. They that put their trust in him shall understand the truth: and such as be faithful in love shall abide with him: for grace and mercy is to his saints, and he hath care for his elect.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the first Chapter of the Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Romans.³

“Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated unto the gospel of God, (Which he had promised afore by his prophets in the holy scriptures,) Concerning his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, which was made of the seed of David according to the flesh; And declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead: By whom we have received grace and apos-

leship, for obedience to the faith among all nations, for his name: Among whom are ye also the called of Jesus Christ: To all that be in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ. First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world. For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers; Making request, if by any means now at length I might have a prosperous journey by the will of God to come unto you. For I long to see you, that I may impart unto you some spiritual gift, to the end ye may be established; That is, that I may be comforted together with you by the mutual faith both of you and me.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “[W]e have received grace and apostleship, for obedience to the faith among all nations, for his name: Among whom are ye also the called of Jesus Christ....”⁴ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Introduction:

One of the key distinctions between the Catholic and Protestant understandings of the Christian Faith is in their two respective views of the individual Christian’s relationship to the Church. The Catholic position is that when Christ calls us to Him, He likewise calls us into His Church. That is, in this view, the Church is not an optional association of individuals who each happens to have his or her own relationship with Jesus but instead, the Church *is* the mechanism by which each of us has his or her primary relationship with Jesus.

The Protestant position, on the other hand, is that Christ calls us individually to Him and thereafter some of us may find it convenient, for the purpose of better living out that calling, to band together with other similarly called persons with whom we can share the benefit of our ex-

periences. In this view, the Church is a voluntary association of people who want to “play church” in the same way as a country club is a voluntary association of people who want to play golf or tennis.

Theme:

Each of you can easily make up his or her own mind about which of these two concepts of the Church best fits Paul’s words about “Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ....”⁵

Note, especially, Paul’s words about “the obedience of faith for the sake of his name..., including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ....” How voluntary do the phrases sound, “the obedience of faith for the sake of his name” and “yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ”?

Development:

In today’s Second Lesson, Paul begins his Epistle with the three-part opening usual for letters in his time. First, he names himself as the writer, “Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated unto the gospel of God....” Second, he names the recipient of the letter, “To all that be in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints....” Finally, he ends with a formal greeting, “Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ”, followed by further confraternal remarks.

The portion I have taken as the text for today is actually a coda to that first part of the opening. After Paul identifies himself as “called to be an apostle, separated unto the gospel of God”, he adds a short disquisition on the nature and purpose of apostleship and discipleship. It is this seeming near-afterthought that we will examine today for what it tells us about our own state of apostleship.

1. According to the Spirit of holiness by the Resurrection from the dead of Our Lord, Jesus Christ, we have received grace and apostleship.

According to Paul, our apostleship originates in Our Lord's Resurrection from the dead, a very appropriate thought for the first Sunday after our Easter Sunday celebration of that Resurrection. This apostleship is not the only thing brought to us by this Resurrection; through Christ's rising from the dead, we have also been given *grace*.

As two commentators have explained it, "*Grace*, which normally means, for Paul, God's undeserved favour shown to sinful men, can also be a synonym for 'power, ability' from God.... So here it qualifies *apostleship*, and signifies 'the God-given ability to perform the role of apostleship.'"⁶

Thus not only has God given us, as members of the Church, a specific "apostleship", which is a mission, but the Holy Spirit has also given us the power and ability to carry out that mission.

2. We have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of His Name.

To us, as citizens of what we are accustomed to call a "democracy",⁷ obedience is a somewhat foreign concept. We normally think of it as being a regular feature of only one area of our public life, the military, and outside of that sphere, "obedience" tends to carry somewhat negative connotations.

So it requires a real effort of cross-cultural understanding for us to grasp that the Church is not a democracy, is not a republic, but is a monarchy. Nor is it the modern kind of toothless, Social Democratic monarchy with which we are familiar from Great Britain, Scandinavia, the Netherlands, or Belgium. Those are not monarchies in any meaningful sense, they are just socialist republics with hereditary ceremonial presidencies.

The Church is an absolute monarchy and, moreover, a monarchy of divine origin. The first and greatest obligation of the Christian is obedience to God, not argument with God, and certainly not proposing to God amendments to His plan for the salvation of humanity. This is pointed up by a rather ironic joke one sometimes hears to the effect that “I’m perfectly willing to serve God, it’s just that I see my rôle as that of a consultant.”

So the primary purpose of the apostleship, or mission, to which we have been called is to teach obedience to God, an obedience that arises out of Faith in Him, and an obedience that begins with our submitting ourselves to Him and to His commands. We cannot teach others to do that which we are unable, or unwilling, to do ourselves.

3. We have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all nations.

Once we have made some progress toward submitting ourselves to God’s requirements, we must turn our attention outwards. The most basic mission of the Church, and therefore of each of its members, is to carry the Gospel to the whole world.

Listen carefully to the words in which that mission was laid down: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, *teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you*; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.”⁸

Those words, “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” do not sound very different than “to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all nations”,⁹ do they?

Conclusion:

In the words of today's First Lesson, "God created man to be immortal, and made him to be an image of his own eternity. Nevertheless through envy of the devil came death into the world: and they that do hold of his side do find it."¹⁰

God sent to us His Son to enable us "to be immortal" and to regain that "image of his own eternity". That Son died for us, and rose again from the grave, to enable us "to be immortal" and to regain that "image of his own eternity". It is now up to us: we can accept that opportunity or we can reject it, but we cannot alter or negotiate over its terms.

If we choose to accept that offer, if we choose to benefit from the opportunity God has given us "to be immortal" and to regain that "image of his own eternity", the way we show God that we have accepted it is "the obedience of faith for the sake of his name", both our own obedience and that of all nations to whom we have taught it.

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¹ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

² *Wisdom 2:23-3:9* (KJV).

³ Romans 1:1-12 (KJV).

⁴ Romans 1:5-6 (KJV).

⁵ Romans 1:4b-6 (RSV).

⁶ *F. Davidson and Ralph P. Martin, Romans*, in D. GUTHRIE AND J. A. MOTYER, EDs., THE NEW BIBLE COMMENTARY: REVISED, 3rd ed. 1016 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1970).

⁷ Actually, it is a "republic".

⁸ St. Matthew 28:18-20 (RSV) (emphasis supplied).

⁹ Romans 1:5b (RSV).

¹⁰ *Wisdom 2:23-24* (KJV).

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