

Sermon for Morning Prayer The Third Sunday after Easter

Lessons:

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the fifteenth Verse of the twelfth Chapter of the Second Book of Samuel, otherwise called, The Second Book of the Kings.

“... And the LORD struck the child that Uriah’s wife bare unto David, and it was very sick. David therefore besought God for the child; and David fasted, and went in, and lay all night upon the earth. And the elders of his house arose, and went to him, to raise him up from the earth: but he would not, neither did he eat bread with them. And it came to pass on the seventh day, that the child died. And the servants of David feared to tell him that the child was dead: for they said, Behold, while the child was yet alive, we spake unto him, and he would not hearken unto our voice: how will he then vex himself, if we tell him that the child is dead? But when David saw that his servants whispered, David perceived that the child was dead: therefore David said unto his servants, Is the child dead? And they said, He is dead. Then David arose from the earth, and washed, and anointed himself, and changed his apparel, and came into the house of the LORD, and worshipped: then he came to his own house; and when he required, they set bread before him, and he did eat. Then said his servants unto him, What thing is this that thou hast done? thou didst fast and weep for the child, while it was alive; but when the child was dead, thou didst rise and eat bread. And he said, While the child was yet alive, I fasted and wept: for I said, Who can tell whether GOD will be gracious to me, that the child may live? But now he is dead, wherefore should I fast? can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the fourteenth Chapter of the Gospel According to St. John.

“Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also. And whither I

go ye know, and the way ye know. Thomas saith unto him, Lord, we know not whither thou goest; and how can we know the way? Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me. If ye had known me, ye should have known my Father also: and from henceforth ye know him, and have seen him. Philip saith unto him, Lord, shew us the Father, and it sufficeth us. Jesus saith unto him, Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known me, Philip? he that hath seen me hath seen the Father; and how sayest thou then, Shew us the Father? Believest thou not that I am in the Father, and the Father in me? the words that I speak unto you I speak not of myself: but the Father that dwelleth in me, he doeth the works. Believe me that I am in the Father, and the Father in me: or else believe me for the very works' sake. Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go unto my Father. And whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If ye shall ask any thing in my name, I will do it.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me. If ye had known me, ye should have known my Father also: and from henceforth ye know him, and have seen him.” In the Name of the Father, and of the † Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Introduction:

The world is a scary place. This is why the pagans were concerned to identify the controlling spirit behind every manifestation of nature, so those spirits could be propitiated – bought off, really, in a sort of celestial bribery – in an effort to reduce the uncertainties of life.

That is why the pagans envisioned a multitude of gods, living in a whole housing development of temples, each served by its own, competing priesthood, and each demanding its own worship services, sacrifices, and offerings. Thus the chaos of life was not, in fact, reduced; it was simply moved from the expanses of nature into the town and incorporated into the cityscape.

Although many of today's well-publicized celebrities do not seem to have learned this, paganism in any form does not cure the uncertainties of life. It merely perpetuates them.

Theme:

The Christian way of dealing with these uncertainties is rather different, however. "Let not your heart be troubled" say the words that begin today's Second Lesson. This is one of the principal pillars of the Christian Faith: that sincere belief in, and true love of, God brings to us assurance and peace. Once we know God, we know that our most urgent needs are provided for and so we can enjoy what we have in joy and contentment.

Development:

1. The Judeo-Christian view of history is of a consistent account of God's interaction with mankind.

If we look at the Old Testament as a whole, we see that it reveals a consistent pattern of interaction between God and humanity. God has a plan for us and that plan required our careful fostering and development, from the time of creation until the Coming of Christ. The first stage of that development was the identification and isolation of the Hebrews as a separate, identifiable people or nation, a nation with its own unique relationship to God.

The second stage of that development was God's slow, patient teaching to that nation of what it means to have a covenant, a relationship of promises and trust, with God. The pagans could not trust their gods to do anything except enjoy themselves and, sometimes, make arbitrary sport with humanity; the Jews could trust God to take care of their every need – including the need for correction and discipline.

The third stage of that development was when the Hebrews had been educated to the point they could understand what it means that God came to earth as a man. The Jews' Covenant with God could have been seen by outsiders as something akin to the occasional idiosyncratic pagan's personal devotion to the cult of one particular god to the neglect of others, somewhat deepened and strengthened perhaps, but nonetheless understandable. An incarnate God, however, was something beyond any pagan claims or experience.

2. When God developed and fostered the ancient Jews into His chosen people, He taught them the reality and seriousness of *sin*.

Perhaps the greatest change brought by God's new "Kindergarten" or "preschool" for the Hebrews was to teach them the reality of *sin*. Pagans have no sense of sin: if a pagan chooses to do some act that will affront some one of the gods or goddesses, he simply needs to do it in a way that is unlikely to come to that god or goddess's attention.

The pagan deities are not omniscient and if the pagan worshipper succeeds in getting away with something, that is no different than his getting an extraordinarily good bargain in business. If he does not get a way with it, that just means a few more sacrifices and offerings to buy off the offended god or goddess. No enduring relationship is threatened because there was never any real relationship to begin with. However, God taught the Jews that He sees all and knows all and that, moreover, there are certain actions that separate His worshippers from Him. Where the whole point of the Hebrew religion is to foster a relationship with God, not to obstruct or interrupt it, this is a serious matter. Human sin breaks the contract with God.

One of the best examples of this is found in the Second Book of Samuel, in the account of King David's murderous affair with Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite. The portion of the account that deals with the death of David and Bathsheba's adulterine child forms the First Lesson for today.

God taught David, and through him the Hebrews, two important lessons by way of that story. Firstly, sin brings real consequences. God punished David and Bathsheba's adultery, and David's jealous murder of Bathsheba's husband, by depriving them of the child they conceived in sin.

To our eyes, it may appear unjust that this innocent child was the one to suffer for his parents' misconduct, but we must remember that God's justice and limited human concepts of justice are not the same. Also, we know that this child was spared the many troubles and pains of life in a pre-scientific age and we may be confident that God cared for him appropriately. Secondly, even the most grievous sins may be repented and forgiven. David was an adulterer and a murderer; Bathsheba was an adulteress and an accomplice to her husband's murder. Nevertheless, after they repented, they were permitted to have another child and this child became the great King Solomon.

3. The New Covenant, or the Christian expansion and fulfillment of the Old Covenant, brought with it an entirely new way of knowing God and that way of knowing includes the cure for sin.

The ancient Jews knew God through the record of God's mighty works on their behalf, as recorded in the words of Scripture and as carried to them by their prophets. This was a great advance on the distant, rather bemused understandings of the pagans but it was still a difference rather of degree than of kind. The Christian experience was radically different, however: God actually came among us to prove to us that He was intimately concerned with our welfare and that we can have a real relationship with him.

The personal relationship that Christ's followers had with Him during His earthly ministry, and the sacramental relationship that His followers have had with Him since His Resurrection, are completely unprecedented. No ancient religion – no other modern one, for that matter – offered its worshippers any such opportunity.

Equally unprecedented is the way Christ has made this new form of relationship the cure for the ancient, and previously incurable, problem of sin. Under the Old Covenant, except for the unusual case of David and Bathsheba, almost no one was forgiven for actual sins committed. Moses was punished for his lack of trust in God by being denied entry into the Promised Land. Saul was punished for disobeying God by being deprived of his kingship. The prophet who turned aside while returning from delivering his message was eaten by a lion. And on and on, and none of those Old Testament sinners appears to have been forgiven.

The New Covenant brought us not only a new relationship with God: as the Second Lesson tells us, we are able to know the Father by knowing His Son and because that Son became a real human being, we can know Him in ways no pagan could ever have known any of his many gods. But even more than that, by knowing the Son we are given the remedy for sin, which would otherwise separate us from both the Father and the Son.

Conclusion:

This remedy for sin is simple in concept and quite difficult in execution. First, we must accept and believe that the Son *will* forgive our sins. Then, we must truly repent of those sins, that is, we must not only be actually sorry that we committed them but we must actually intend to turn away from them and put them behind us. Finally, we must confess those sins to God and ask for His forgiveness.

We can see in today's First Lesson that King David followed these steps when God convicted him of his sins. His actions expressed his sorrow for his misconduct and his prayers surely included petitions to God to forgive him. He must have repented of his adultery, because he married Bathsheba, and the Bible records no other instance of his committing murder. The guilty parents were permitted to conceive another child and that child lived and prospered, so it is evident that God did, indeed, forgive them.

If we, like David, truly repent, we can ask Our Lord to forgive us, as He forgave him. And as He assures us in today's Second Lesson, if we ask that of Him, He will grant it to us: "And whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If ye shall ask any thing in my name, I will do it."

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*The Rev'd Canon John A. Hollister
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1 Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER x (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

2 II Samuel 12:15b-23 (KJV).

3 St. John 14:1-14 (KJV).

4 Isaiah 40:8 (KJV).

5 Numbers 27:12-14.

6 I Samuel 15:14-26.

7 I Kings 13:14-28.

8 St. John 14:13-14 (KJV).

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