

## **SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER THE FIRST SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY**

### **Lessons:**<sup>i</sup>

**The First Lesson:** Here beginneth the twenty-second Verse of the eighth Chapter of the Proverbs.<sup>ii</sup>

“... The LORD possessed me in the beginning of his way, before his works of old. I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was. When there were no depths, I was brought forth; when there were no fountains abounding with water. Before the mountains were settled, before the hills was I brought forth: While as yet he had not made the earth, nor the fields, nor the highest part of the dust of the world. When he prepared the heavens, I was there: when he set a compass upon the face of the depth: When he established the clouds above: when he strengthened the fountains of the deep: When he gave to the sea his decree, that the waters should not pass his commandment: when he appointed the foundations of the earth: Then I was by him, as one brought up with him: and I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him; Rejoicing in the habitable part of his earth; and my delights were with the sons of men. Now therefore hearken unto me, O ye children: for blessed are they that keep my ways. Hear instruction, and be wise, and refuse it not. Blessed is the man that heareth me, watching daily at my gates, waiting at the posts of my doors. For whoso findeth me findeth life, and shall obtain favour of the LORD.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

**The Second Lesson:** Here beginneth the ninth Verse of the first Chapter of the Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Colossians.<sup>iii</sup>

“... For this cause we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to desire that ye might be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; That ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God; Strengthened with all might, according to his glorious power, unto all patience and longsuffering with joyfulness; Giving thanks unto the Father, which hath made us meet to

be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light: Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son: In whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins: Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature: For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him: And he is before all things, and by him all things consist. And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence. For it pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell; And, having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself; by him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven. And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled In the body of his flesh through death, to present you holy and unblameable and unreproveable in his sight: If ye continue in the faith grounded and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel, which ye have heard, and which was preached to every creature which is under heaven; whereof I Paul am made a minister; Who now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body's sake, which is the church: Whereof I am made a minister, according to the dispensation of God which is given to me for you, to fulfil the word of God; Even the mystery which hath been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest to his saints: To whom God would make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you, the hope of glory: Whom we preach, warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom; that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus: Whereunto I also labour, striving according to his working, which worketh in me mightily.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

**Text:**

From the Second Lesson: “[G]iving thanks unto the Father, who has qualified us meet to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the

kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”<sup>iv</sup>

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

### **Introduction, Theme, and Development:**

When the Revised Standard Version gives this passage as “He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness”, what it is referring to, of course, is that He has rescued us from Satan’s power,<sup>v</sup> which is Satan’s ability to tempt us into sin. Thus St. Paul explained to King Agrippa what, the risen Christ had told him on the road to Damascus, the risen Christ had told him was his new commission as an Apostle: “to open their eyes, that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.”<sup>vi</sup>

This is one of the most basic doctrines of Christianity: that through Jesus Christ, God has given us His power to resist Satan and overcome our bondage to sin. Yet as often as we hear this repeated in Church, it is something that, as soon as we step outside the door after the service, we tend to forget. How often does one drive out of the church parking lot, presumably in a state of grace, yet as soon as one turns into the street, something about which one is idly thinking, or something some other driver does, snatches one’s mind back into the hostile, judgemental attitudes of the weekday world?

That is just an illustration of how seductive this world and its ruler truly are. Our propensity to get lost in the world’s preoccupations and temptations is just part of our inborn tendency to act contrary to God’s will for us. As the Book of Common Prayer puts it so beautifully, “We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; And we have done those things which we ought not to have done; and there is no health in us.”<sup>vii</sup>

This is what we call “original sin”, that is, our predisposition to sin that comes to us from our origins. It was the English wit and Christian apologist, C. S. Lewis, who is said to have remarked that original sin is

the only doctrine of the Christian Faith that is empirically verifiable, for one has merely to look around one at how people actually behave. Or, as the IXth Article of Religion puts it, “Original sin ... is the fault and corruption of the Nature of every man ... whereby man is very far gone from original righteousness, and is of his own nature inclined to evil....”<sup>viii</sup>

But if we are innately inclined to offend God, how can we overcome this defect? The answer is given in today’s Second Lesson, immediately following the portion I quoted as our text for this sermon:

“For in him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. And you, who were estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of his flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him, provided that you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel which you heard, which has been preached to every creature under heaven....”<sup>ix</sup>

Again, the Articles of Religion put this with unmistakable clarity: “The condition of Man after the fall of Adam is such, that he cannot turn and prepare himself, by his own natural strength and good works, to faith, and calling upon God. Wherefore we have no power to do good works pleasant and acceptable to God, without the grace of God preventing us, that we may have a good will, and working with us, when we have that good will.”<sup>x</sup>

This is how God has, in the words of today’s Lesson, “qualified us meet to share in the inheritance of the saints in light”, “has delivered us from the dominion of darkness”, and has “transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son” because “he has now reconciled [us] in his body of his flesh by his death”.

### **Conclusion:**

This is Epiphanytide, the Church’s celebration of the showing of Christ to the nations, in the persons of the representatives of those

nations, the three Persian wise men. We are members of those nations, that is, we are those to whom the Son of God was shown, precisely because “he has now reconciled [us] in his body of his flesh by his death”.

There is really only one way we feeble human beings can show our gratitude to God for this gift which is, quite literally, beyond any estimation because it is, again quite literally, infinite. It is, in the words of the “General Thanksgiving” in Morning and Evening Prayer: “that we show forth [His] praise, not only with our lips but in our lives, by giving up ourselves to [His] service, and by walking before [Him] in holiness and righteousness all our days....”<sup>xi</sup>

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The Rev’d Canon John A. Hollister<sup>xii</sup>  
January 9, 2011.

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

<sup>ii</sup> *Proverbs 8: 22-35 (KJV).*

<sup>iii</sup> *Colossians 1: 9-29 (KJV).*

<sup>iv</sup> *Colossians 1: 12-14 (RSV).*

<sup>v</sup> *HERBERT G. MAY AND BRUCE M. METZGER, THE NEW OXFORD ANNOTATED BIBLE WITH THE APOCRYPHA REVISED STANDARD VERSION 1428 fn 13 (Oxford University Press 1977); ibid. 1178 fn n.*

<sup>vi</sup> *Acts 26: 18 (RSV).*

<sup>vii</sup> *A General Confession, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 6 & 23 (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*

<sup>viii</sup> *Article IX “Of Original or Birth-Sin”, Articles of Religion, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 604 (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*

<sup>ix</sup> *Colossians 1: 19-23a (KJV).*

<sup>x</sup> *Article X “Of Free-Will”, Articles of Religion, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 604 (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*

<sup>xi</sup> *A General Thanksgiving, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 19 & 33 (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*

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