

Sermon for Morning Prayer The Second Sunday in Lent

Lessons:

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the thirty-seventh Verse of the eighth Chapter of the First Book of the Kings.

“If there be in the land famine, if there be pestilence, blasting, mildew, locust, or if there be caterpillar; if their enemy besiege them in the land of their cities; whatsoever plague, whatsoever sickness there be; What prayer and supplication soever be made by any man, or by all thy people Israel, which shall know every man the plague of his own heart, and spread forth his hands toward this house: Then hear thou in heaven thy dwelling place, and forgive, and do, and give to every man according to his ways, whose heart thou knowest; (for thou, even thou only, knowest the hearts of all the children of men;) That they may fear thee all the days that they live in the land which thou gavest unto our fathers. Moreover concerning a stranger, that is not of thy people Israel, but cometh out of a far country for thy name’s sake; (For they shall hear of thy great name, and of thy strong hand, and of thy stretched out arm;) when he shall come and pray toward this house; Hear thou in heaven thy dwelling place, and do according to all that the stranger calleth to thee for: that all people of the earth may know thy name, to fear thee, as do thy people Israel; and that they may know that this house, which I have builded, is called by thy name.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the twelfth Verse of the third Chapter of the Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Colossians.

“... Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye. And above all these things put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness. And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which also ye are called in one body; and be ye thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and

hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the First Lesson: “[W]hatsoever plague, whatsoever sickness there be; What prayer and supplication soever be made by any man, or by all thy people Israel, which shall know every man the plague of his own heart, and spread forth his hands toward this house: Then hear thou in heaven thy dwelling place, and forgive, and do, and give to every man according to his ways, whose heart thou knowest....”

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

Introduction:

Today’s First Lesson is taken from King Solomon’s prayer of dedication for the first Temple in Jerusalem. In this portion of that prayer, Solomon describes the sorts of petitions that will rise to God from the precincts of the new Temple; in doing so, he uses pairs of contrasts to suggest the breadth or range of those petitions.

Many will be raised because of agricultural calamities, among which will be *blasting* or the drying of the crops by sere winds. But where the crops may fail because of dry winds, they may also fail because of humid ones, which will bring *mildew*. Sometimes the petitions will be brought by Israelites but sometimes by “strangers”, that is, foreigners who have come to worship the God of the Israelites. Whatever the nature of the events that require these intercessions, whoever it may be that brings them, God will hear them in heaven and will respond.

These transactions – the petitions brought to the Temple by the worshippers, involving physical needs such as basic sustenance, and God’s responses to those petitions, also involving the provision of that sustenance – reflect the nature of the original version of God’s Covenant with mankind.

That covenant, the Abrahamic-Mosaic Covenant, or Sinaitic Covenant, was like a long-distance business transaction. The worshipper transmitted his or her requests to God, as though speaking them into a telephone’s mouthpiece on a trunk call.

Sometimes the worshipper dispatched something tangible toward God, by making a formal sacrifice.

God was expected to respond by sending an appropriate package of goods, as by United Parcel Service. Sometimes that package was what the worshipper ordered, as good crops or victory over the nation's enemies. Occasionally it was a rain of fire, or an agricultural disaster, or some other negative sign. But it was always a long-distance transaction.

Also, that Covenant concentrated entirely on *outward dispositions*. That is, it focused upon the *actions* of the covenant community and, therefore, on the *actions* of the individual member of that community, the worshipper.

God surveyed the outward evidence provided by the *behavior* of the worshipper and, on the basis of that outward evidence, judged whether that worshipper was a sinner or was a worthy member of the community. The primary tests were whether the individual Jew observed the Ten Commandments, tithed, offered the appropriate rituals at the appropriate seasons, wore the prescribed clothes, and ate the prescribed foods. Conformity in these matters assured compliance with the Covenant.

Theme:

With the first coming of Christ, that relationship changed. From a long-distance exchange of messages and/or goods, the conversation became a face-to-face discussion, as between family members seated in the same room. While the discussion still took account of outward actions – the Ten Commandments, for example, remain valid and binding – it has been broadened and now includes the intentions and motives of the worshipper as well.

Development:

1. This transition from outward appearances to inward realities is well illustrated by the different treatment of adultery under the Old version of the Covenant and the New one.

The Seventh Commandment states baldly: “Thou shalt not commit adultery.” But the Jews under the Old Covenant, who were supposedly bound by that Commandment, defined “adultery” almost as broadly as might a Washington politician being deposed in a sexual harassment suit.

Just recall the story of Tamar. When Judah’s widowed daughter-in-law was found to be pregnant, he threatened to put her to death for adultery until he discovered that he was the father of her unborn child because she had tricked him into performing his duty of levirate marriage. From this incident we can easily see that Tamar, who had no living husband, could nevertheless be deemed guilty of adultery, while Judah, who was a married man, was not considered an adulterer even though he had consorted with a woman he thought to be a prostitute.

This sort of special, and self-interested, pleading does not survive under the New Covenant. Now we are told that not only is the act of sex outside marriage forbidden, but even relishing the thought of it:

“Ye have heard it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

2. This emphasis on interior dispositions, upon motives, thoughts, and desires, is summarized in the ultimate ruling principle of the New Covenant: the “Law of Love”.

Jesus Himself summarized the teaching of the new, post-Incarnation version of the Covenant the following words:

“... [T]he first of all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel; the Lord our God is one Lord: And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these.”

So now we can be sure that God will judge our actions, at least in part, on the basis of how they demonstrate or fail to demonstrate our love for His other people.

Conclusion:

This notion of God’s concern with our inward thoughts and spiritual state was not unknown in Old Testament times: in Deuteronomy, the Israelites are told regarding the most characteristic outward sign of the Old Covenant:

“Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no more stiffnecked.”⁸ But the emphasis is much stronger and more basic in the New: “[H]e is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh; But he is a Jew which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter....”

It is our hearts and minds that God wants us to conform to His commands, not marks in the skins of our bodies.

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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 I Kings 8:37-43 (KJV).

3 Colossians 3:12-17 (KJV).

4 I Kings 8:38-39a (KJV).

5 Genesis 38:6-26.

6 St. Matthew 5:27-28 (KJV).

7 St. Mark 12:29-31 (KJV).

8 Deuteronomy 10:16 (KJV); cf. Deuteronomy 30:36 and Jeremiah 4:4.

9 Romans 2:28-29 (KJV).

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