

## Sermon for Morning Prayer The Third Sunday in Lent

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

**The First Lesson:** Here beginneth the sixth Chapter of the Fifth Book of Moses, called Deuteronomy. <sup>ii</sup>

“Now these are the commandments, the statutes, and the judgments, which the LORD your God commanded to teach you, that ye might do them in the land whither ye go to possess it: That thou mightest fear the LORD thy God, to keep all his statutes and his commandments, which I command thee, thou, and thy son, and thy son’s son, all the days of thy life; and that thy days may be prolonged.

“Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe to do it; that it may be well with thee, and that ye may increase mightily, as the LORD God of thy fathers hath promised thee, in the land that floweth with milk and honey. Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD: And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes. And thou shalt write them upon the posts of thy house, and on thy gates.

“... And when thy son asketh thee in time to come, saying, What mean the testimonies, and the statutes, and the judgments, which the LORD our God hath commanded you? Then thou shalt say unto thy son, We were Pharaoh’s bondmen in Egypt; and the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand: And the Lord shewed [SHOAH] signs and wonders, great and sore, upon Egypt, upon Pharaoh, and upon all his household, before our eyes: And he brought us out from thence, that he might bring us in, to give us the land which he sware unto our fathers. And the LORD commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the LORD our God, for our good always, that he might preserve us alive, as it is at this day. And it shall be our righteousness, if we observe to do all these commandments before the LORD our God, as he hath commanded us.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

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

“And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ. I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able. For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men? For while one saith, I am of Paul; and another, I am of Apollos; are ye not carnal? Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers by whom ye believed, even as the Lord gave to every man? I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase. So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase. Now he that planteth and he that watereth are one: and every man shall receive his own reward according to his own labour. For we are labourers together with God: ye are God’s husbandry, ye are God’s building. According to the grace of God which is given unto me, as a wise masterbuilder, I have laid the foundation, and another buildeth thereon. But let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon. For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; Every man’s work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man’s work of what sort it is. If any man’s work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man’s work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire. Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you? If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are. Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you seemeth to be wise in this world, let him become a fool, that he may be wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, He taketh the wise in their own craftiness. And again, The Lord knoweth the thoughts of the wise, that they are vain. Therefore let no man glory in men. For all things are yours; Whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, or the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come; all are yours; And ye are Christ’s; and Christ is God’s.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

**Text:**

From the Second Lesson: “Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers by whom ye believed, even as the Lord gave to every man? I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase. So then neither is he that

planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase.”<sup>iv</sup> In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

### **Development:**

We in the Continuing Anglican movement are pilgrims in a pilgrim church. In many of our congregations, which rent or borrow their places of worship, we are, quite literally, like the ancient Israelites sojourning in the desert. In these temporary quarters, we set up our Tabernacle, our portable place of worship, for each service, then when we have worshipped God, we strike that Tabernacle and pack it away again.

Even in our congregations that are fortunate enough to have permanent quarters, we often give an impression of temporary occupancy because we are so few in number that when visitors come, or even when we ourselves cast our eyes around our sanctuaries, we see only a handful of faithful people.

In this situation, it is natural that the subject of “church growth” is constantly on our minds. We are preoccupied with questions such as, “Why do we not grow?” “What do we need to change, so visitors will stay with us and not leave after one visit, never to return again?”

Of course, we should be concerned about our census or membership numbers, for that is one measure of how well we are fulfilling Our Lord’s Great Commission, which is the only proper “mission statement” for a church: “All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.”<sup>v</sup>

To put it bluntly, we should never let ourselves fall into the trap of complacency, because so long as our congregations remain small in size, they are not reaching the people of the world to whom Our Lord has directed our attention.

That said, however, it would be an equal error to fall into despair and give up just because most of the congregations of other denominations around us are much larger than we are. A couple of years ago, one of the founders and most notable exponents of the modern “seeker friendly” or “church growth” movement admitted that ten years before, his congregation had some 20,000 members, that it had gained

several thousand members each year since then, and that, at the time he spoke, it still numbered 20,000 members.

In other words, the vision of the church as entertainment has been an overwhelming success at getting people in the doors and an equally overwhelming failure at keeping them as life-long members of God's flock. Instead, they have rushed out the back doors just as fast as they have streamed in the front ones.

So the task of Christian evangelism is really three-fold. First, we must make contact with the unchurched population, for if we are not in contact with them, we cannot speak to them, and if we cannot speak to them, we cannot tell them about Jesus and the unimaginable things He has done for them.

Second, once we are in contact with the people of the world, and have gotten enough of their attention that they are listening to us – when we are really good at this stage of the process, when they come to visit us in God's house – we must convince them of the reality of Our Lord's love for them and must infuse them with an enthusiasm for responding to His love by living the Christian life. This is what might properly be called “conversion”.

Finally, we must train and support them in developing the skills and knowledge necessary to practice and persevere in that new Christian life. This “discipleship” stage is one where we ourselves could profitably take lessons from our own members overseas, who survive and thrive spiritually in some exceedingly difficult cultural environments, often in the midst of paganism and in the face of fierce oppression.

At each stage of this process, we will not appear to be successful with every single person with whom we are in contact. When we try to speak of Christianity, many will brush us off or pass us by without stopping to listen. Many who do pause to listen to us will pass on without appearing to be influenced by what we say. Even of those who stay to listen, or who take the trouble to cross the thresholds of our church buildings, many will come once, or even a few times, and will then disappear.

The few who return for further visits, and the even fewer who become members, will still suffer some attrition over time. Even some seemingly life-long members will fall away after some personal tragedy or family disruption, such as the death of a long-time spouse.

## Conclusion:

We must not be cast down by these seeming failures. We are in the business primarily of planting seeds, not of betting on the harvest. We never know when a seed we ourselves have cast will take root and grow and, most often, we will never be vouchsafed a glimpse of those seedlings. We must simply have faith that those seeds God wants to sprout will, in His good time, grow and flourish.

That is the point of today's Gospel: What is important is not the identity of the sower, or of the husbandman, but of the harvester, who is God Himself: "I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase."<sup>vi</sup>

As St. Paul told the Corinthians, we plant the seeds. Then the way we care for those seeds is by giving the world an example of Christian living, from which those around us may form an accurate appraisal of the power of the Gospel. As our late and sainted Archbishop Stephens wrote in the prayer he so often used to close the Eucharist:

Go with us, our heavenly Father, into the world;  
Mould us, make us, and shape us into the image of Christ,  
That men may take notice that we have been with Jesus,  
And so join with us in thy house to praise His holy Name.  
Through Him who died and rose again for us,  
Thy Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

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*The Rev'd Canon John A. Hollister<sup>vii</sup>  
March 7, 2010.*

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

<sup>ii</sup> *Deuteronomy 6: 1-9, 20-25 (KJV).*

<sup>iii</sup> *I Corinthians 3: 1-23 (KJV).*

<sup>iv</sup> *I Corinthians 3: 5-7 (KJV).*

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<sup>v</sup> *St. Mark 28: 18b-20 (KJV).*

<sup>vi</sup> *St. Mark 28: 19 (KJV).*

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