

Sermon for Morning Prayer The Fourth Sunday in Lent

Lessons:ⁱ

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the twenty-first Verse of the thirty-ninth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel.ⁱⁱ

“... And I will set my glory among the heathen, and all the heathen shall see my judgment that I have executed, and my hand that I have laid upon them. So the house of Israel shall know that I am the LORD their God from that day and forward.

“And the heathen shall know that the house of Israel went into captivity for their iniquity: because they trespassed against me, therefore hid I my face from them, and gave them into the hand of their enemies: so fell they all by the sword. According to their uncleanness and according to their transgressions have I done unto them, and hid my face from them. Therefore thus saith the Lord GOD; Now will I bring again the captivity of Jacob, and have mercy upon the whole house of Israel, and will be jealous for my holy name; After that they have borne their shame, and all their trespasses whereby they have trespassed against me, when they dwelt safely in their land, and none made them afraid. When I have brought them again from the people, and gathered them out of their enemies’ lands, and am sanctified in them in the sight of many nations; Then shall they know that I am the LORD their God, which caused them to be led into captivity among the heathen: but I have gathered them unto their own land, and have left none of them any more there. Neither will I hide my face any more from them: for I have poured out my spirit upon the house of Israel, saith the Lord GOD.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

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

“... Seeing then that we have such hope, we use great plainness of speech: And not as Moses, which put a vail over his face, that the children of Israel could not stedfastly look to the end of that which is abolished: But their minds were blinded: for until this day remaineth the same vail untaken away in the reading of the old testament; which vail is done away in Christ. But even unto this day, when Moses is read, the vail is upon their heart. Nevertheless when it shall turn to the Lord, the vail shall be taken away. Now the Lord is that Spirit: and where the Spirit

of the Lord is, there is liberty. But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the First Lesson: “[A]ll the nations shall see my judgment which I have executed, and my hand which I have laid on them. The house of Israel shall know that I am the LORD their God, from that day forward.”^{iv} In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Development:

Ezekiel wrote during the Jews’ exile in Mesopotamia. His countrymen assumed their God had abandoned them because He had permitted their two kingdoms to be invaded and conquered but Ezekiel’s message was that the same God, who had sent them into captivity because of their iniquity, would ultimately bring them victory over their enemies and the restoration of their nation. Then in the Israelites’ rejoicing over that restoration, they would forget the pains and disappointments that had dogged the latter years of their apostate kingdoms.

The Jews naturally saw this prophecy as a promise of military and political victory and restoration. However, we, as Christians, look at each of the Old Testament promises as something that looks forward to the coming of Christ, the Anointed One, the Messiah. We understand the coming victory and restoration of which Ezekiel spoke to be the ultimate victory over physical death that in Ezekiel’s time was yet to come, but that in our time has already come, with God’s final incarnate revelation of Himself in His Son, Jesus the Christ.

The Jews of Jesus’ own time were well aware of the promises that had been made by Ezekiel and other Old Testament prophets and so they, like Ezekiel’s contemporaries, looked for a military victory and a political restoration. Despite a brief dawn under the Maccabees and their successors, however, these hopes remained unfulfilled down to Jesus’ day.

However, they remained very much alive. Indeed, these continuing secular expectations were precisely what would move the populace of Jerusalem to cheer

Our Lord's entry into the city on Palm Sunday. The disappointment of these secular expectations was precisely what would move that same populace to cheer Our Lord's condemnation by the Roman governor and His tortured death on Good Friday.

Without that Good Friday death, there could have been no Easter morning Resurrection and, forty days later, no triumphant bodily Ascension into heaven. It was these latter two events that finally convinced the nascent Christian Church that its Lord and founder had, in fact, triumphed over death and, therefore, also triumphed over sin.

Conclusion:

These basic truths of the Christian Faith are simple to state, difficult to accept, and impossible to understand. Our only way to apprehend them is to hoist them in as a package, the truth of which is attested to by reliable eye and ear witnesses. On their testimony, then, we can accept the narrative of events, the explanation for which must ever remain beyond the analysis and arrangement of mere human ratiocination.

It is when we thus view the New Testament story as a whole, with its beginning, middle, and end, that we can begin to understand how God has brought to us the victory and restoration that Ezekiel foretold. Lent is the appointed season for reflection and meditation on that very story, so it may be well for us to review the "Reader's Digest" version of that story, which we repeat every time we celebrate the Offices of Morning and Evening Prayer:

I BELIEVE in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth :

And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord : Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, Born of the Virgin Mary : Suffered under Pontius Pilate, Was crucified, dead, and buried : He descended into hell; The third day he rose again from the dead : He ascended into heaven, And sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty : From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Ghost : The holy Catholic Church; The Communion of Saints : The Forgiveness of sins: The Resurrection of the body : And the Life everlasting. Amen.

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

ⁱⁱ *Ezekiel 39: 21-29 (KJV).*

ⁱⁱⁱ *II Corinthians 3: 12-18 (KJV).*

^{iv} *Exekiel 39: 21b-22 (RSV).*