

Sermon for Morning Prayer Rogation Sunday (Easter V)

Lessons: ⁱ

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the twenty-seventh Verse of the fourteenth Chapter of Second Esdras. ⁱⁱ

“... Then went I forth, as he commanded, and gathered all the people together, and said, Hear these words, O Israel. Our fathers at the beginning were strangers in Egypt, from whence they were delivered: And received the law of life, which they kept not, which ye also have transgressed after them. Then was the land, even the land of Sion, parted among you by lot: but your fathers, and ye yourselves, have done unrighteousness, and have not kept the ways which the Highest commanded you. And forasmuch as he is a righteous judge, he took from you in time the thing that he had given you. And now are ye here, and your brethren among you. Therefore if so be that ye will subdue your own understanding, and reform your hearts, ye shall be kept alive and after death ye shall obtain mercy. For after death shall the judgment come, when we shall live again: and then shall the names of the righteous be manifest, and the works of the ungodly shall be declared.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the fourth Chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. ⁱⁱⁱ

“And as they spake unto the people, the priests, and the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees, came upon them, Being grieved that they taught the people, and preached through Jesus the resurrection from the dead. And they laid hands on them, and put them in hold unto the next day: for it was now eventide. Howbeit many of them which heard the word believed; and the number of the men was about five thousand.

“And it came to pass on the morrow, that their rulers, and elders, and scribes, And Annas [ANN-uss] the high priest, and Caiaphas [KYE-uh-fuss], and John, and Alexander, and as many as were of the kindred of the high priest, were gathered together at Jerusalem. And when they had set them in the midst, they asked, By what power, or by what name, have ye done this? Then Peter, filled with the Holy Ghost, said unto them, Ye rulers of the people, and elders of Israel, If we this day be

examined of the good deed done to the impotent man, by what means he is made whole; Be it known unto you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom ye crucified, whom God raised from the dead, even by him doth this man stand here before you whole. This is the stone which was set at nought of you builders, which is become the head of the corner. Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.

“Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were unlearned and ignorant men, they marvelled; and they took knowledge of them, that they had been with Jesus....

“... And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and great grace was upon them all.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the First Lesson: “[I]f so be that ye will subdue your own understanding, and reform your hearts, ye shall be kept alive and after death ye shall obtain mercy.”^{iv} In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Introduction:

There are many illustrations available that show how we, as fallible humans, always tend to seek the easy way in any situation. As just one example, philologists speak of “Grimm’s Law”, which relies on the observation that the speakers of a given language prefer enunciations that put less stress on the muscles of the mouth and throat. Thus the pronunciation of a language changes over time in a predictable fashion by favoring sounds that are easier to make and discarding those that are more difficult to make.

If this is true in an area as basic as our speech, just imagine how well it works in areas that require some real thought and understanding from us, and especially in areas that require some commitment from us. So it should be no great surprise that, over time, the great mass of the population tends to prefer not only those sounds

that are least stressed but also those religious ideas and concepts that are most comfortable to contemplate and that make the least demand on worshippers. And, just as they do with the more difficult sounds, people wish to discard those religious ideas and concepts that make demands on them and that require some real response from them.

Theme:

One of the prime areas in which we find this sort of discomfort is *eschatology* [*ess-kah-TAHL-uh-gee*], the theological discipline that studies where we, as people, are headed. Among the topics within this discipline, the Church has traditionally numbered what it calls “The Four Last Things”, which are the inescapable truths of Death, Judgement, Heaven, and Hell.

In our great-grandparents’ day, anyone who went regularly to church would have heard about each of these Four Last Things on a regular basis. In our day, however, “Entertainment Religion” has taken such strong root that it is rare to hear them mentioned, even at such obvious times as funerals. Indeed, there are now large numbers who consider themselves “Christians” but who have never heard these fundamental realities mentioned even once by their collective name and have very seldom heard any serious reference to their ultimate meanings.

Development:

Today’s First Lesson is a salutary and express reminder of at least two of these truths, those of Death and Judgement. In addition, it implicitly refers to the other two because when it tells us that after the Judgement we may live again, it is clearly implying the alternative possibilities of Heaven and Hell.

1. The Christian Faith teaches, and has always taught, that we all shall die and then we all shall be judged by Our Lord.

Esdras writes, “For after death shall the judgment come, when we shall live again: and then shall the names of the righteous be manifest, and the works of the ungodly shall be declared.”^v It is impossible to ignore the ever-present reality of Death, because it is mentioned every day in the newspapers and on television, but it is very easy to overlook the essential connection between Death and Judgement, because that Judgement is almost never mentioned.

If we were always conscious that each of us will, indeed, one day stand before our Maker and will be called to render an account of how we have lived here on earth, our behavior would almost certainly be much different than it in fact is. This is precisely why, like teenagers who deliberately ignore their parents' curfew hours, we wish to push that looming Judgement into the back of our minds, so we can continue to live guided only by our senses of pleasure and convenience, undisturbed by any threat to our sovereign self-absorption.

Scripture, however, is not patient with this sort of self-delusion. As St. Matthew reminds us, "The Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works."^{vi}

2. The Christian Faith teaches, and has always taught, that the Judgement is a *real* judgement, with real consequences that are affected by our actions during our lives.

Esdras tells us, "[Y]our fathers, and ye yourselves, have done unrighteousness, and have not kept the ways which the Highest commanded you. And forasmuch as he is a righteous judge, he took from you in time the thing that he had given you."^{vii} The thing which He took from us, and that we may hope He will restore to us, is, of course, the freedom from the restraints of Death that our first parents enjoyed in the Garden prior to their Fall.^{viii}

The universal human experience of Death is a direct consequence of our race's disobedience toward God. He loves us but, like a truly loving parent, He will not let us get away with self-destructive behavior. Therefore, whatever our lives here on earth have earned for us, that is what He will award us in His Judgement.

As St. Matthew says, "The Son of man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity; And shall cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth. Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father."^{ix}

3. The Christian Faith teaches, and has always taught, that our chance of salvation, and therefore of surviving the Judgement, depends on our accepting in faith what Our Lord died to confer on us.

As Esdras tells us, “[I]f so be that ye will subdue your own understanding, and reform your hearts, ye shall be kept alive and after death ye shall obtain mercy.”^x The principal part of that reformation of our hearts must always be our acceptance in faith of Jesus Christ as our only hope and assurance of salvation.

As St. Paul wrote to the Ephesians, “God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;) And hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus: That in the ages to come he might shew [SHOW] the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus. For by grace are ye saved through faith....”^{xi}

Conclusion:

Today’s Second Lesson tells us, “[T]hey taught the people, and preached through Jesus the resurrection from the dead.”^{xii} This was in fulfillment of Our Lord’s injunction that “This gospel of kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come.”^{xiii}

So St. Luke is able to say, “And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”^{xiv} Note, however, that these preachers were not teaching something of their own invention. Rather, as Esdras demanded, they had subdued their own understanding, and reformed their hearts,^{xv} accepting and reaching that which had been revealed to them to be true.

It was only in the light of those revealed truths that they could reasonably hope that they, like those to whom Esdras wrote, would be kept alive and that, after death, they, too, would obtain mercy.^{xvi}

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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 xxiv (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*

ⁱⁱ *II Esdras 14:27-35 (KJV).*

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- ⁱⁱⁱ *Acts 4: 1-13, 33 (KJV).*
- ^{iv} *II Esdras 14: 34 (KJV).*
- ^v *II Esdras 14: 35 (KJV).*
- ^{vi} *St. Matthew 16: 27 (KJV).*
- ^{vii} *II Esdras 14: 31b-32 (KJV).*
- ^{viii} *Genesis 3: 19.*
- ^{ix} *St. Matthew 13: 41-43 (KJV).*
- ^x *II Esdras 14: 34 (KJV).*
- ^{xi} *Ephesians 2: 4-8a (KJV).*
- ^{xii} *Acts 4: 2 (KJV).*
- ^{xiii} *St. Matthew 24: 14 (KJV).*
- ^{xiv} *St. Luke 3: 6 (KJV).*
- ^{xv} *II Esdras 14: 34 (KJV).*
- ^{xvi} *Ibid.*