

Sermon for Morning Prayer Septuagesima Sunday

Lessons:ⁱ

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the fourth Verse of the third Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel.ⁱⁱ

“And he said unto me, Son of man, go, get thee unto the house of Israel, and speak with my words unto them. For thou art not sent to a people of a strange speech and of an hard language, but to the house of Israel; Not to many people of a strange speech and of an hard language, whose words thou canst not understand. Surely, had I sent thee to them, they would have hearkened unto thee. But the house of Israel will not hearken unto thee; for they will not hearken unto me: for all the house of Israel are impudent and hardhearted. Behold, I have made thy face strong against their faces, and thy forehead strong against their foreheads. As an adamant harder than flint have I made thy forehead: fear them not, neither be dismayed at their looks, though they be a rebellious house. Moreover he said unto me, Son of man, all my words that I shall speak unto thee receive in thine heart, and hear with thine ears. And go, get thee to them of the captivity, unto the children of thy people, and speak unto them, and tell them, Thus saith the Lord GOD; whether they will hear, or whether they will forbear.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the fifth Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Matthew.ⁱⁱⁱ

“And seeing the multitudes, he went up into a mountain: and when he was set, his disciples came unto him: And he opened his mouth, and taught them, saying, Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled. Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God. Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad:

for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.

“Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men. Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the First Lesson: “[Y]ou are not sent to a people of foreign speech and a hard language, but to the house of Israel – not to many peoples of foreign speech and a hard language, whose words you cannot understand. Surely, if I sent you to such, they would listen to you.”^{iv} In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Homily:

The messages of today’s two Lessons apply to all of us, inasmuch as we are all told by Our Lord in His Great Commission to us that our Baptisms and Confirmations have ordained us to be evangelists to the world.^v Does that surprise you, the fact that you, each of you, has been ordained by God to be an active missionary for our Faith? Well, if that does come as a surprise, just ask yourself, it you do not do it, who else will? How many paid staff members does your parish or mission support, whose sole job description is to go out and spread the Christian message?

Unless your congregation is a **very** unusual one, it doesn’t have any. So, to invert a common observation, that means that if it is no-one’s job, then it must be everyone’s job, or else it won’t get done. Yet, clearly, **that** result is precisely **not** what Jesus had in mind when He spoke to His disciples upon His departure.

In our First Lesson, Ezekiel relates God’s observations on one of the principal difficulties of that evangelistic task: that those, who most especially need to hear of God’s love and grace, are often the most unwilling to let us speak of them. This

reluctance is particularly marked among those “of the house of Israel”, that is, among those who have already heard something of God and God’s wishes for them but who make one or the other of two great mistakes concerning what they have heard.

Our present “post-Christian” society is the product of two millennia of Christianization. Thus we see all around us people who believe that they have already heard all about Christianity and further believe that they understand everything they need to know about it. That is the first of those two great mistakes of which I spoke a moment ago.

The other such mistake is the widespread belief that, as a result of being raised in a culture that was once permeated with Christian concepts and ideals, particular individuals are thereby rendered Christian, as though they had absorbed the Faith and the Covenant by a process of immersion or osmosis.

But Christianity is an act of commitment, of decision, so that living on a street that has a church building at one end and a few Christians scattered among the houses there is not enough to make one a Christian, any more than is listening to radio broadcasts of vacuous repetitions of “Me and Jesus, me and Jesus, me and Jesus” or the like. As the great Duke of Wellington once observed, if a man is born in a stable, that does not suffice to make him an horse.

The Israelites to whom Ezekiel was witnessing fall into that first group, the ones who err by believing they have heard all the prophet’s message and understand all that God is calling them to be and to do. However, as the front line of Christian evangelization, ordinary baptized Christians will have to cope with all too many who present both the difficulties I have described. Against these, the best tactic is to be very well prepared in the basics of the Christian Faith, so as to be ever ready to explain what is in error about the many common misconceptions we encounter.

The problems Ezekiel highlights in today’s First Lesson can be summed up roughly by the old proverb, “familiarity breeds contempt”. Or, in this case, perhaps it is more inattention than contempt, but the result is the same. Then, that inattention to basics becomes, in effect, the same as misunderstanding, about which the great American social philosopher Will Rogers said, “It’s not what they don’t know that scares me, it’s what they know that ain’t so.”

In today's Second Lesson, Our Lord describes first the beneficial effects created by attentive Christians who actively remember their vocation and thus serve as effective witnesses to the world around them. These are the meek, those who seek righteousness, the pure in heart, the merciful, and those who are patient under persecution. The witness of their lives and manner of conducting themselves – what the King James translation calls their “conversation” – is what, in the end, will be most influential in converting those who encounter them.

Unfortunately, this sort of patient, exemplary, “lifestyle” evangelism is difficult. It requires a great deal more of its practitioners than the simple, outward expressions of going to church on Sunday, saying grace before meals, refraining from open profanity, supporting socially-approved charities, and the other outward observances of an easy, Pharisaic “works righteousness”. Moreover, even when this difficult “lifestyle evangelism” is sincerely practiced, it is tiresome, it takes years to bear fruit, and even committed Christians will eventually become discouraged.

Whichever reason is at fault in any given case, once one of God's baptized evangelists falls into either error, that of mere outward show or that of inward disillusion, that man or woman is no longer an effective witness for Christ. This is what Our Lord addresses in the latter part of today's Second Lesson: the tasteless salt and the shrouded light. As Jesus tells us, salt only seasons food when it retains its saltiness; light only guides men's steps when it shines forth freely.

Conclusion:

In the parables of the faithful servants and of the wise and foolish virgins, Our Lord told us that we cannot know when He will come again, and so we must always be prepared to face Him and explain ourselves to Him. Similarly, we can never know when we will be called to provide a needed witness to someone who does not yet know Christ.

Sometimes, like an unwary Baptist in a liquor store, we may not even know we are being observed. Indeed, our most powerful Christian example is usually given when we are not even conscious of doing so. It is easy to appear to be an upright, religious person on Sunday mornings, but the real test is how we behave when we are tired and out of sorts, late on a weekday evening after a hard day at work. Or, better yet, after such a day as we are driving home through gridlock traffic....

So, for the folks who desire a truly “modern” translation of the Bible, today’s portion of St. Matthew’s Gospel might say, “Blessed are they that signal their turns.... Blessed are they that let merging lanes into the stream of traffic.” After all, that is, quite literally, “where the rubber meets the road”.

--00000--

The Rev’d Canon John A. Hollister^{vi}
January 31, 2010.

ⁱ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xvi (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*

ⁱⁱ *Ezekiel 3: 4-11 (KJV).*

ⁱⁱⁱ *St. Matthew 5: 1-16 (KJV).*

^{iv} *Ezekiel 3: 5-6 (RSV).*

^v *St. Matthew 28: 19-20.*

^{vi} *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.*