

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER

Sexagesima Sunday¹

Lessons:

The First Lesson:² Here beginneth the fourth Verse of the fiftieth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.³

“... The Lord GOD hath given me the tongue of the learned, that I should know how to speak a word in season to him that is weary: he wakeneth morning by morning, he wakeneth mine ear to hear as the learned.

“The Lord GOD hath opened mine ear, and I was not rebellious, neither turned away back. I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to them that plucked off the hair: I hid not my face from shame and spitting.

“For the Lord GOD will help me; therefore shall I not be confounded: therefore have I set my face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be ashamed. He is near that justifieth me; who will contend with me? let us stand together: who is mine adversary? let him come near to me. Behold, the Lord GOD will help me; who is he that shall condemn me? lo, they all shall wax old as a garment; the moth shall eat them up.

“Who is among you that feareth the LORD, that obeyeth the voice of his servant, that walketh in darkness, and hath no light? let him trust in the name of the LORD, and stay upon his God.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson:⁴ Here beginneth the fourth Verse of the eighth Chapter of the Gospel according to St. Luke.⁵

“When much people were gathered together, and were come to him out of every city, he spake by a parable: A sower went out to sow his seed: and as he sowed, some fell by the way-side; and it was trodden down, and the fowls of the air devoured it. And some fell upon a rock; and as soon as it was sprung up, it withered away, because it lacked moisture. And some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprang up with it, and choked it. And other fell on good ground, and sprang up, and bare

fruit an hundredfold. And when he had said these things, he cried, He that hath ears to hear, let him hear. And his disciples asked him, saying, What might this parable be? And he said, Unto you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God: but to others in parables; that seeing they might not see, and hearing they might not understand. Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. Those by the way-side are they that hear; then cometh the devil, and taketh away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved. They on the rock are they, which, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no root, which for a while believe, and in time of temptation fall away. And that which fell among thorns are they, which, when they have heard, go forth, and are choked with cares and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to perfection. But that on the good ground are they, which in an honest and good heart, having heard the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience.”

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “The seed is the word of God. Those by the way-side are they that hear; then cometh the devil, and taketh away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved. They on the rock are they, which, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no root, which for a while believe, and in time of temptation fall away.”⁶ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Introduction:

Traditionally, all Christians have attributed to God three essential characteristics.⁷ Thus we know that God is all-powerful, all-seeing, and always present. Further, what we know as time—that is, the concepts of past, present, and future—are aspects of the created order just as are the physical dimensions of length, width, and height. Because God lives outside of, and superior to, that created order, He is in no wise bound by those limitations, either those of space or those of time.

Thus there is no question that, if God chooses to trouble Himself to do so, He can know precisely what, in our terms, has occurred, is occurring, or will occur in the life of any one of us. Therefore this also includes His knowing the ultimate happening, that is, what will be the result when we face Our Lord at the final Judgement.

Theme:

Only a very fine line differentiates the rather obvious concept of God's *foreknowing* what will happen in our lives from the much more problematic proposition of God's *foreordaining* what will happen in our lives. The first concept—that God *knows* what our futures will be—is essentially a matter of definition, because *omniscience*,⁸ or being all-knowing, is one of the fundamental attributes of God. The second concept—that God *wills*, that is, intends and makes certain, what our futures are to be—is not, however, a similar matter of definition.

Development:

Rather, that is a fallible human deduction from another fundamental attribute of God, namely, that He is *omnipotent*,⁹ that is, all-powerful. The key here is to realize that once we say God is all-knowing, then we necessarily imply that He *has* knowledge of everything, which certainly includes our individual futures. However, once we say God is all-powerful, that by no means implies, or necessitates, that in any particular person's life, He *uses* that power that we acknowledge He possesses.

To put this important distinction another way, just because God *can* predetermine each person's ultimate fate does not mean that, in fact, He *does* so. And how we see that distinction makes a world of difference in how we approach the demands of the Christian life.

Let me say this again. It is perfectly possible for God to be all-knowing, as all Christians acknowledge Him to be, and so for Him to be fully aware of the way the life of each of us will play itself out in fact, and at the same time for Him to refrain from interfering in that life so as

to permit each of us to exercise free will and to choose how that life will unfold.

The idea that God intends, and therefore ordains, particular outcomes in the lives of individual humans is the concept that theologians call *predestination*¹⁰ and it has been one of the most troublesome ideas of the last five centuries of the Christian experience. Nor is it something that is, by any means, believed by all, or even most, Christians.

The notion of predestination can be found, in embryonic form, in the writings of St. Augustine [awe-GUSS-tin] of Hippo but in its most elaborately-developed form it is associated with the followers of a French lawyer, Jean [**ZHAWN**] Cauvin [**COE-van**], who may be more recognizable under the English form of his name, John Calvin. In its most complete form, the concept of predestination that is associated with Calvinism is called *double predestination*, because it presumes not only that God has, from before the beginning of the world, chosen some—but only some—to be saved, and also that He has similarly chosen some others to be condemned to eternal damnation. Further, neither of those two groups has, in the eyes of the Calvinists, any possibility of altering or escaping their divinely-ordained fates.

While all Christians accept that those who are ultimately saved are, in fact, saved because of God's mercy and not because of their own deserts, to the human mind, it seems revoltingly unjust to suggest that some are condemned to destruction without their necessarily having “earned” that fate, or at least when their errors are no greater or more serious than are those of others who are undeservedly elected to salvation. (Of course, we must be careful about applying merely human notions of justice to God's decisions and activities; that is the lesson of, for example, the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, which formed last week's Gospel at Holy Communion.¹¹)

A moment's thought will show that the whole New Testament account of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and of His coming among us, completely contradicts this notion of *predestination*. Our Lord's mission began with the announcement of His coming by John the Baptist

and John made this announcement by calling the Jews of his day to repent of their sins. But there would have been no point in God's sending a special messenger to call them to repentance, because there would have been no point in their repenting, if their ultimate fates had already been predetermined, so that their individual choices and actions could have no possible effects on God's final dealings with them.

And the same is true of the rest of Christ's ministry here on earth. It is simply silly to claim that God sent His only-begotten Son to die for us, and to take upon Himself our sins, in order to make possible our salvation, while simultaneously claiming that God has already decreed for each one of us whether he or she will be saved or will be lost. Thus if predestination were true, then all the essential Christian teachings, from the Incarnation through the death, Resurrection, and Ascension of Our Lord, the Atonement, and the final Judgment, would all be reduced to pointless ceremonials, empty gestures, and meaningless exercises.

I, for one, refuse to believe that God would waste His time making empty gestures. So when today's Second Lesson tells us, "Those by the way-side are they that hear; then cometh the devil, and taketh away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved",¹² then to me that statement about the devil's persuading people to turn away from what they have learned clearly implies that *all* those who have heard the Word of God have the opportunity to be saved, if only they will heed that Word and take Him into their lives.

Similarly, when this Gospel passage declares, "They on the rock are they, which, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no root, which for a while believe, and in time of temptation fall away",¹³ it is telling us that it is up to each of us whether we will let Jesus Christ take root in his or hear heart. God may very well know how each of us will choose in this matter; in fact, He almost certainly does know that. But I am bound to believe that, for each one of us, He wishes we will make the right choice and take the right action, the ones that will, in the end, bring us to live with Him in eternity.

Conclusion:

So, obviously, then, the point of this parable is to persuade each of us not to be those “which fell among thorns ... which, when they have heard, go forth, and are choked with cares and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to perfection.”¹⁴ But there would have been absolutely no point in Jesus’s warning us against this possibility if we did not have the power to choose to avoid it.

So it is all the more important that we use that power of choice (even if it is choice aided by God’s prevenient grace),¹⁵ which theologians call our *free will*,¹⁶ to position ourselves on the “good ground”, as today’s Second Lesson calls it when it says: “But that on the good ground are they, which in an honest and good heart, having heard the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience.”¹⁷

That, I suggest to you, dear friends, is what John the Baptist, Our Lord Jesus Christ, and all the Fathers, Doctors, and heroes of the Church are calling us to do: to exercise our imperfect wills to the maximum extent we can so that we repent us of our sins, we accept and follow Jesus Christ, and we worship the Lord God in spirit and in truth all the days of our lives.



The Rev’d Canon John A. Hollister, JD¹⁸
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¹ This sermon was originally written on the Gospel for Holy Communion on Sexagesima Sunday, 2012.

² *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xvi (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

³ Isaiah 50:4-10 (KJV).

⁴ “Upon any Sunday or Holy Day, the Minister may read the Epistle or the Gospel of the Day in place of the Second Lesson at Morning or Evening Prayer.” *Concerning the Service of the Church*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER viii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

⁵ St. Luke 8:4-15 (KJV).

⁶ St. Luke 8:11b-13 (KJV).

⁷ JUSTO L. GONZALEZ, *ESSENTIAL THEOLOGICAL TERMS* 22 (Westminster John Knox Press 2005), s.v. Attributes (of God).

⁸ GONZALEZ, *op. cit.*, 122-123, s.v. Omniscience.

⁹ *Id.*, s.v. Omnipotence.

¹⁰ GONZALEZ, *op. cit.* 138-139, s.v. Predestination.

¹¹ St. Matthew 20:1-16.

¹² St. Luke 8:12 (KJV).

¹³ St. Luke 8:13 (KJV).

¹⁴ St. Luke 8:14 (KJV).

¹⁵ It is precisely to assure access to this prevenient grace that it is so important for Christians to make baptism available to as many as possible, for baptism is the precondition for appropriating the graces of the other Sacraments.

¹⁶ GONZALEZ, *op. cit.* 65-66, *s.v.* Freedom of the Will.

¹⁷ St. Luke 8:15 (KJV).

¹⁸ Supply Priest, Holy Angels Anglican Catholic Mission, Picayune, MS, and Christ Anglican Catholic Pro-Cathedral 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.