

Sermon for Morning Prayer The Fourteenth Sunday After Trinity

I. Lessons:ⁱ

A. The First Lesson: Here beginneth the tenth Verse of the twenty-ninth Chapter of the First Book of the Chronicles.ⁱⁱ

“Wherefore David blessed the LORD before all the congregation: and David said, Blessed be thou, LORD God of Israel our father, for ever and ever. Thine, O LORD, is the greatness, and the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty: for all that is in the heaven and in the earth is thine; thine is the kingdom, O LORD, and thou art exalted as head above all. Both riches and honour come of thee, and thou reignest over all; and in thine hand is power and might; and in thine hand it is to make great, and to give strength unto all. Now therefore, our God, we thank thee, and praise thy glorious name. But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able to offer so willingly after this sort? for all things come of thee, and of thine own have we given thee. For we are strangers before thee, and sojourners, as were all our fathers: our days on the earth are as a shadow, and there is none abiding. O LORD our God, all this store that we have prepared to build thee an house for thine holy name cometh of thine hand, and is all thine own. I know also, my God, that thou triest the heart, and hast pleasure in uprightness. As for me, in the uprightness of mine heart I have willingly offered all these things: and now have I seen with joy thy people, which are present here, to offer willingly unto thee.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

B. The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the fifth Verse of the seventeenth Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Luke.ⁱⁱⁱ

“... And the apostles said unto the Lord, Increase our faith. And the Lord said, If ye had faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye might say unto this sycamine tree, Be thou plucked up by the root, and be thou planted in the sea; and it should obey you. But which of you, having a servant plowing or feeding cattle, will say unto him by and by, when he

is come from the field, Go and sit down to meat? And will not rather say unto him, Make ready wherewith I may sup, and gird thyself, and serve me, till I have eaten and drunken; and afterward thou shalt eat and drink? Doth he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I trow not. So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

II. Text:

From the Second Lesson: “[W]hen ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do.”^{iv} In the Name of the Father, and of the ☩ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

III. Introduction:

We live in a world that rejects the reality and omnipresence of sin and that exalts philanthropy and good works. Almost every day, our newspapers, magazines, television, and radio assure us that there is no such thing as “sin”, in the traditional sense of personal behavior that offends God, especially not when what has always been viewed as “sin” is merely the result of individuals’ acting out their inborn impulses. Instead, there is only “social sin”, or unfavorable socio-economic circumstances that afflict some, here or abroad, and which must therefore be the fault of those who are not so afflicted by them.

Similarly, those same media assure us daily that celebrities are heroes, and worthy of our esteem and admiration, when they hold charity concerts to raise money for the misfortunate or travel to troubled regions and there adopt a child or two, or go on talk radio or T.V. to explain how all the world’s ills are caused by a superpower which spends billions of dollars, and tankers of the blood of its young men and women, to alleviate those same ills.

IV. Theme:

Every Christian knows, or by the exercise of the most minimal diligence should know, that both of these propositions are tragically and fatally false. The entirety of the Bible may be looked at, without fear of exaggeration, as one prolonged lesson in the reality of sin. There are, indeed, personal choices as to individual behavior that result in *sin*, and God is, beyond any reasonable person's questioning, displeased at our sins. And while God smiles on those who so love their fellow men and women that they cannot help but do good for those others, His favor cannot be bought by good works, no matter how bountiful they are, no matter how attractive the person who does them, and no matter how well-publicized they are by the major news media.

V. Development:

The Judeo-Christian God may not send down a thunderbolt to fry a particular sinner, as the ancient Greeks and Romans thought their chief god Jove or Jupiter did to those who displeased him. So it was undoubtedly pure coincidence that on a clear day, an unpredicted localized thunderstorm burned the roof off Durham Cathedral right after David Jenkins, the Church of England's Bishop of Durham, publicly denied essential tenets of the Christian Faith.

But the Judeo-Christian God does unquestionably do something that is, perhaps, even worse. When one of His people acts in a way that rejects Him, He simply accepts that person's decision. That is, while God does not always cut us off from Him on account of our sins, He permits us to cut ourselves off from Him, and the ultimate result is the same.

On that issue of our being unable to buy our way into God's good graces, our text from today's Second Lesson is very similar to one in the famous parable of the servants and talents^v – that's "talents" as in an ancient unit of weight, in the case of the parable, for weighing precious metals. You will recall that in the parable, a rich man set off on a journey, having first entrusted some of his servants with large sums of money for safekeeping during his absence.

Several of those servants invested their master's money, increasing it, but one simply buried it in the ground and, when his master returned, dug it up and returned to his master exactly what he had been charged with preserving. The master praised the servants who had made him a profit and castigated the servant who had returned exactly what he had received, calling him "wicked and slothful".^{vi}

Then there is our Lord's parable of the Pharisee and the publican (really, a tax collector^{vii}) in the Temple.^{viii} The Pharisee obeyed every jot and tittle of his religious duties and yet Jesus said the humble tax collector, almost universally viewed as a traitor to his nation, was the one who went down from the Temple justified in the sight of God, not the devout and pious Pharisee.^{ix}

The common lesson of these two parables should be clear: merely fulfilling our basic duties is not enough to gain us any merit, especially not any merit in the eyes of God. All of our religious observances, even our attendance at the Sacrifice of the Mass, are merely "our bounden duty and service",^x for which we can expect no special credit or reward. No matter how much we ever do, it will never be enough to overcome the affronts our sins have given to God.

As we are reminded in the XIVth Article of Religion,^{xi} "Of Works of Supererogation" [*sue-purr-air-oh-GAY-shun*], any voluntary works we undertake that go beyond God's basic Commandments to us are mere surplusage, for they cannot buy God's recognition or favor. This is because all of our acts and works, whether they just barely measure up to what is required of us or whether they go far beyond those basic obligations, are insufficient to overcome "the fault and corruption of the Nature of every man, that naturally is engendered in the offspring of Adam, whereby man is very far gone from original righteousness...."^{xii}

As the XIIth Article of Religion teaches us, the good works of the faithful are pleasing to the true God, not as a pagan worshipper's offerings to bribe his idol, but as evidence that the faith that motivates them is, indeed, a true and living faith.^{xiii} In a way, one could say that such works are a sort of feedback. They tell nothing to God, for He already knows how real our faith is but, like milestones on an ancient

road, they tell *us* that we are at least on the right track, even if we still have far to go.

VI. Conclusion:

But if sin is an ever-present reality in us, as the XVth Article of Religion^{xiv} assures us it is, and if, even when we have done everything God has commanded us, we still get no “extra credit” in our divine report cards, what is left to us? How are we to be saved, that is, brought into fellowship with God, if we cannot earn that privilege, like a charity’s most diligent workers being honored at its “volunteer worker recognition” dinner?

As those same Articles tell us, we are to be saved only by the Name of Jesus Christ.^{xv} We are “justified”, that is, accounted righteous before God, not for anything we ourselves have done but, as the Canon of Consecration in the Eucharist teaches us, through the providential application to us of the meritorious benefits of our Lord Jesus Christ’s “one oblation of himself once offered” upon the Cross on Calvary, which made “a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world.”^{xvi}

There are many sound reasons for going regularly to church on every Sunday and holy day, but surely one of the most persuasive must be to enable us repeatedly to assist in giving thanks – that is, in “making Eucharist” – for that one, all-sufficient but unimaginable Sacrifice.

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

ⁱⁱ *I Chronicles 29: 10-17 (KJV).*

ⁱⁱⁱ *St. Luke 17: 5-10 (KJV).*

^{iv} *St. Luke 17: 10 (KJV).*

^v *St. Matthew 25: 14-30.*

^{vi} *St. Matthew 25: 26 (KJV).*

^{vii} *In 15th and 16th Century English, a “publican” was one who undertook contracts for public works, which in the King James usage referred to the ancient Roman system of farming provincial taxes out to syndicates of private investors.*

^{viii} *St. Luke 18: 9-14.*

^{ix} *St. Luke 18: 14.*

^x *The Order for the Administration of the Lord’s Supper or Holy Communion, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 81 (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*

^{xi} *Articles of Religion, The Book of Common Prayer 605 (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*

^{xii} *Article XVIII, “Of obtaining eternal Salvation only by the Name of Christ”, Articles of Religion, The Book of Common Prayer 606 (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*

^{xiii} *“Of Good Works”, Articles of Religion, The Book of Common Prayer 605 (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*

^{xiv} *“But all we ..., although baptized, and born again in Christ, yet offend in many things; and if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” “Of Christ alone without Sin”, Articles of Religion, The Book of Common Prayer 605 (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*

^{xv} *Article IX, “Of Original or Birth-Sin”, Articles of Religion, The Book of Common Prayer 604 (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*

^{xvi} *The Order for the Administration of the Lord’s Supper or Holy Communion, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 80 (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*

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