

Sermon for Morning Prayer Trinity XV

Lessons:

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the sixth verse of the seventh Chapter of the Fifth Book of Moses, called Deuteronomy:ⁱ

“For thou art an holy people unto the Lord thy God: the Lord thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto himself, above all people that are upon the face of the earth. The Lord did not set his love upon you, nor choose you, because ye were more in number than any people; for ye were the fewest of all people: But because the Lord loved you, and because he would keep the oath which he had sworn unto your fathers, hath the Lord brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you out of the house of bondmen, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore that the Lord thy God, he is God, the faithful God, which keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love him and keep his commandments to a thousand generations; And repayeth them that hate him to their face, to destroy them: he will not be slack to him that hateth him, he will repay him to his face. Thou shalt therefore keep the commandments, and the statutes, and the judgments, which I command thee this day, to do them. Wherefore it shall come to pass, if ye hearken to these judgments, and keep, and do them, that the Lord thy God shall keep unto thee the covenant and the mercy which he sware unto thy fathers: And he will love thee, and bless thee, and multiply thee: he will also bless the fruit of thy womb, and the fruit of thy land, thy corn, and thy wine, and thine oil, the increase of thy kine, and the flocks of thy sheep, in the land which he sware unto thy fathers to give thee.”ⁱⁱ

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the fifteenth verse of the second Chapter of the Epistle of the Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Galatians.

“We who are Jews by nature, and not sinners of the Gentiles, Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we

might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified. But if, while we seek to be justified by Christ, we ourselves also are found sinners, is therefore Christ the minister of sin? God forbid. For if I build again the things which I destroyed, I make myself a transgressor. For I through the law am dead to the law, that I might live unto God. I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the First Lesson: “[T]he Lord thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto himself, above all people that are upon the face of the earth.”^{iv} In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Introduction:

When the ancient Jewish people are mentioned in sermons or other discussions within the Church, we are accustomed to hear it referred to as “the Chosen People”. Most of the accounts in the historical books of the Old Testament are best understood from the perspective suggested by this phrase: sometimes the story is how God upheld this special relationship by saving the Israelites from one threat or another, sometimes it is about how the Israelites often ignored this special relationship and fell spectacularly short of their obligations to God.^v

Always, however, the background text to those stories is the fact that God *chose* to form some scattered Semitic clans and tribes into a single people and then *chose* to enter into a *covenant* relationship, into a treaty or contract, with that people.

Theme:

Covenants, treaties, or contracts: All these types of agreements are, at bottom, simply mutual promises. The overwhelming nature of

this fact – that God reached down to earth and promised a miscellaneous collection of rough human beings that He would maintain a special relationship with that group – the *what* it was that God did for the Jews, and the long Old Testament story of *how* He did it – both tend to obscure a question we should ask ourselves more often than we do.

That question is, simply, *Why* did God choose to enter into this relationship with an insignificant and unknown ancient people. In fact, the question is *why* did He choose to make it a people in the first place; Why did He not leave it as a number of separate, wandering families? And that, of course, leads to the further question: *Why* is it significant to us, today, to understand what He did nearly three and a half thousand years ago?

Development:

- 1. In today's First Lesson, Moses tells the Israelites that it was not for any qualities of their own that they were chosen by God; rather, it was because of God's love for them.**

There was nothing inherently lovable about the Israelites; their own chronicles tell us that more clearly than anything. They were rough, unruly, self-willed, hard-headed, thick-headed, and disobedient. They were not a great people, nor a rich people, nor an unusually cultured people. They were not great artists, except perhaps in literature, nor, for most of their independent existence were they a great military force, but simply skilled guerilla warriors and raiders. In many ways, they resembled the feuding families of the old English-Scottish Border, which figure in the novels of Sir Walter Scott, himself a descendant of one of those warring clans.

Yet Moses tells these unlikely objects of divine regard,

“The Lord did not set his love upon you, nor choose you, because ye were more in number than any people; for ye were the fewest of all people: But because the Lord loved you, and because he would keep the oath which he had sworn unto your father....”^{vi}

So it was out of God's inscrutable and inexplicable love for those unpromising beings that He first formed them into a recognizable nation, then entered into a contract with it, and then guided and guarded it against enemies and calamities despite its recurring unfaithfulness to Him.

These weak humans had no possible way of compelling God to keep His side of their bargain but it is this overwhelming divine love that caused His to keep His promises to them and, therefore, assures us that He will keep His promises to their heirs, that is, to us.

2. In the Covenant's first form, that is, as God entered into it with the Israelites, all God asked of His people was that it obey His rules, both His rules for the conduct of their religion and His rules for the conduct of their daily lives.

Moses explained to the Jews what their side of the Covenant entailed, using these words:

“Wherefore it shall come to pass, if ye harken to these judgments, and keep, and do them, that the Lord thy God shall keep unto thee the covenant and the mercy which he sware unto thy fathers....”^{vii}

So if the Israelites performed their side of the contract, by observing the ritual and behavioral laws God laid down for them, He would keep His promises to them and preserve them. More, He would cause them to prosper, would give them a home, and in that home would look out for their every need:

“And he will love thee, and bless thee, and multiply thee: he will also bless the fruit of thy womb, and the fruit of thy land, thy corn, and thy wine, and thine oil, the increase of thy kine, and the flocks of thy sheep, in the land which he sware unto thy fathers to give thee.”^{viii}

As we know from the balance of the Old Testament story, however, the Jews constantly fell away from obedience to God, constantly allowed themselves to be seduced by the false gods with

which their region abounded, constantly forgot all that He had done for them, and constantly had to be recalled to His ways.

And, as often as not, when God extended His mercy to them by sending prophets and teachers to remind them of their obligations, instead of listening to those prophets, they reviled them and persecuted them. Just think of Elijah, running for his life in the desert and hiding in a cave to avoid being murdered by King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. Yet God continuously forgave them their manifest sins and continuously sent them teachers and reminded them of His word to them.

So, in the end, God did not even enforce His bargain with the Hebrews, He simply bore Himself toward them as a troubled but loving parent, suffering their neglect and disdain, reaching out to them and looking after them, hoping they would eventually come to their senses and follow their better natures.

3. Mankind's manifest inability to follow the rules God laid down proved the inadequacy of the Old Testament version of the Covenant. Original Sin – our inborn tendency to fall away from God – is too strong for our weak wills, even when those wills desire to perform our part of our bargain with God.

As St. Paul told the Galatians, and others, over and over, the Law – the Old Testament structure of rules and obligations which men and women were expected to obey as their side of the bargain with God – proved impossible for weak humans to fulfill. Mere commands and prescriptions can never bring us to God because we can never completely comply with them.

Yet, just as God forgave the Israelites, over and over, for their shortcomings and shortfalls, so in the end He provided the solution to our weakness and inadequacy. The Mosaic Covenant was built, or rather appeared to be built, upon rules and prescriptions, commands for mankind to follow, but behind those rules and commands stood always God's love for humanity.

Why do parents lay down rules and demands for their children? Out of love, of course, to keep those children safe and to assure that they

grow up properly. So, too, did God provide the Mosaic rules for the Jews, so that they could stay safe and develop properly into a people. But the time comes when children are grown and can no longer be restrained by rules and all they carry with them is the love with which their parents have imbued them. Then all they are left with to guide them is the memory and reality of the love which lay behind all the principles and the mores with which the parents struggled to inculcate into them.

That is when the parents see how their love follows those children and sometimes leads them aright when a mere rules would fail. So, too, with the end of the Old Testament era, the Jewish people had reached the limit of its possible expansion and development. So God, out of His inexhaustible love, sent Himself to us in human flesh, the miracle we call the Incarnation, the enfleshing.

This Incarnation acts as an amendment to mankind's original contract with God. As Paul told the Galatians, in this new version of the Covenant,

“[A] man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even as we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law.”^{ix}

Conclusion:

So, in the end, this is the essential lesson of the development of God's covenantal or contractual relationship to mankind. As Paul wrote to the Galatians, “[A] man is not justified by the works of the law”,^x that is, is not saved obedience to commands and rules as the Old Covenant assumed. Instead, “[A]man is ... justified ... by the faith of Jesus Christ”,^{xi} that is, by accepting the fact of God's inconceivable love for us. “[W]e have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law.”^{xii}

So, just as the ancient Hebrews were called by God to respond to His outreach by obeying His laws and commandments, so, too, we are

called to do the same, but those laws and commandments have been reduced in their essence to what we call the Law of Love:

“Hear what our Lord Jesus Christ saith.

“THOU shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it; Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”^{xiii}

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August 31, 2008.

ⁱ *Psalms and Lessons for the Church Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxxiv (PECUSA 1928/1943).*

ⁱⁱ *Deuteronomy 7:6-13.*

ⁱⁱⁱ *Galatians 2:15-20 (KJV).*

^{iv} *Deuteronomy 7:6b (KJV).*

^v *As in the beginning of the Chapter quoted here, Moses predicted they would by, for example, intermarrying with the foreigners around them, Deuteronomy 7:3, or worshipping the foreign gods around them, Deuteronomy 7:4a.*

^{vi} *Deuteronomy 7:7-8a (KJV).*

^{vii} *Deuteronomy 7:12 (KJV).*

^{viii} *Deuteronomy 7:13 (KJV).*

^{ix} *Galatians 2:16 (KJV).*

^x *Galatians 2:16a (KJV).*

^{xi} *Ibid.*

^{xii} *Galatians 2:16b (KJV).*

^{xiii} *THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 69 (PECUSA 1928).*

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