

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER

Trinity XVI

Lessons:ⁱ

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the third Chapter of the second Book of Moses, called Exodus.ⁱⁱ

“Now Moses kept the flock of Jethro his father in law, the priest of Midian: and he led the flock to the backside of the desert, and came to the mountain of God, even to Horeb. And the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush: and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, and the bush was not consumed. And Moses said, I will now turn aside, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt. And when the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called unto him out of the midst of the bush, and said, Moses, Moses. And he said, Here am I. And he said, Draw not nigh hither: put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground. Moreover he said, I am the God of thy father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. And Moses hid his face; for he was afraid to look upon God. And the Lord said, I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows; And I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land unto a good land and a large, unto a land flowing with milk and honey; unto the place of the Canaanites, and the Hittites, and the Amorites, and the Perizzites, and the Hivites, and the Jebusites. Now therefore, behold, the cry of the children of Israel is come unto me: and I have also seen the oppression wherewith the Egyptians oppress them. Come now therefore, and I will send thee unto Pharaoh, that thou mayest bring forth my people the children of Israel out of Egypt. And Moses said unto God, Who am I, that I should go unto Pharaoh, and that I should bring forth the children of Israel out of Egypt? And he said, Certainly I will be with thee; and this shall be a token unto thee, that I have sent thee: When thou hast brought forth the people out of Egypt, ye shall serve God upon this mountain. And Moses said unto God, Behold, when I come unto the children of Israel, and shall say unto them, The God of your fathers hath sent me unto you; and they shall say to me, What is his name? what shall I say unto them? And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and he

said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you. And God said moreover unto Moses, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, The Lord God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, hath sent me unto you: this is my name for ever, and this is my memorial unto all generations.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the fifth Chapter of the First Epistle General of Blessed Peter the Apostle.ⁱⁱⁱ

“The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; Neither as being lords over God’s heritage, but being ensamples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away. Likewise, ye younger, submit yourselves unto the elder. Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble. Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time: Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you. Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour: Whom resist stedfast in the faith, knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in the world. But the God of all grace, who hath called us unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that ye have suffered a while, make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you. To him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ as well as a partaker in the glory that is to be revealed. Tend the flock of God that is

your charge....”^{iv} In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Introduction:

Although these days very few of us live on farms or ranches, we are still close enough to the agricultural society of two generations ago that we easily recognize many features of Christ’s chosen metaphor for the appointed leaders of His Church. Frequently, He referred to them as “shepherds” and the people of the Church, for whom they care, as “the flock”. Indeed, our common term for a clergyman in a parish, “pastor”, is nothing more than a synonym for “shepherd”.

One of a shepherd’s greatest responsibilities is to make sure that his flock is fed and watered so the animals will remain sound and in good condition. Of course, when St. Peter takes this fact and enjoins the “elders” – the clergy – of the Church to feed Christ’s flock, he is telling them to care for the spiritual health of the Christian people with the same care that a shepherd uses to care for the physical health of the sheep.

Moreover, St. Peter tells the elders that they are to exercise their oversight of this people with the same humility and self-sacrifice as a good shepherd exercises toward his flock: “not as domineering over those in your charge but being examples to the flock^v.... Likewise you that are younger be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for God ‘opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.’ Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that in due time he may exalt.”^{vi}

Theme:

The wider Christian Church is in the midst of great upheaval as its people are inundated with messages and teachings that try to suggest that the Faith which has endured for nearly two millennia must now be changed, that principles which have stood unquestioned for twenty centuries as guides for people’s conduct are now obsolete, that the Scriptures which more than sixty generations of Christians believed to be the Word of God are instead merely the artifacts of a single, long-departed culture.

Worse, some of these messages and teachings are uttered by those who occupy offices that, until now, have always been the positions of leadership within and of the Church, that is, the offices of theologians, university professors, priests, bishops, archbishops, metropolitans, and primates. The clergy among these are the shepherds to whom the flock should be able to look for sound guidance – for the paths into lush spiritual pastures – but instead that flock is being led into arid pastures devoid of any nutriment.

Development:

- 1. St. Peter tells us the shepherds, the leaders of the Church, must be humble, must subordinate themselves to the demands of their offices.**

St. Peter tells the Apostles and apostolic men, the “elders” who are the leaders of the new church congregations, “Feed the flock of God which is among you ... [n]either as being lords over God’s heritage, but being ensamples to the flock.... [A]ll of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble. Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time”.

This is the great difference between holding office in the Christian community and holding office in the secular world outside: Christian leaders are, as Christ Himself reminded us, servants of those for whom they care, while secular leaders are lords over those for whom they care.^{vii} Thus Christian leaders must be men of humility, not only because they must put the welfare of their charges before their own, as a shepherd must but the welfare of the sheep before his own, but also because they serve the Almighty God, not themselves.

Proud, self-serving leaders serve the devil, not Christ, no matter what titles they bear or what vestments they wear or what insignia they carry.

2. One of the most important types of humility that is demanded of all members of the Church, but especially of its leaders, is submission to the teachings of the Church.

The Church is not a human institution, it is a divine one. We do not choose to join it, we are called into it by God the Son, the Second Person of the Most Holy and Undivided Trinity, through the working of the Third Person, the Holy Spirit. Thus it is God's Church, not ours, and it exists to serve God's purposes, not ours.

When Christ sent His Apostles out into the world to convert it, He did not command them to go and preach and teach whatever seemed good to them at the time, He commanded them to go out and preach and teach those things He Himself had taught them.^{viii}

Of course, those were the things that had been handed on to them by Christ during the three years of His ministry here on earth. Once that ministry ended with His Ascension, He gave them no further direct teachings. There are three important implications of these facts.

First, *traditio*, the Latin term for “something handed over or handed on”, is the root of our word “tradition”. The Tradition of the Church is simply the whole body of truths that the Church received from our Lord and that it has handed over to each succeeding generation, for that generation to preserve and pass on in its turn.

Second, since our Lord clearly intended that the first and second generations of Christians should be able to be saved just as much as later generations, then necessarily, all that is required for the salvation of mankind was conveyed to the leaders of the new Church during their three years' tutorial and internship with its founder. No new requirements for salvation have been added since that time.

Third, and for today's discussion most important, the leaders Christ appointed to oversee His new Church, and to guide its spread throughout all the known world, were appointed to spread His teachings as He handed those teachings down, they were not appointed to vary those teachings or to depart from them. Instead, their essential function – and thus the essential function of their successors in the Apostolic

Office – is to seek as diligently as they can to understand what the Church has always taught and then, in their own turn, to teach those traditional truths to those whose spiritual welfare has been entrusted to them.

As is shown by the election of St. Matthias to be the twelfth Apostle in the place of Judas Iscariot, an Apostle is a witness to Christ's Revelation, not an innovator of his own revelation. In other words, it is a requirement of the Apostolic Offices that its holders submit themselves in humility not only to our Lord but to our Lord's teachings.

3. Those who abuse their offices to propound teachings at odds with the Church's traditional Faith are false shepherds, wolves not pastors, and their teachings are not only misleading but dangerous.

Christ warned us that there would be false shepherds who would disguise themselves as faithful ones in order to lead astray the people of the Church: "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves".^{ix}

Such "leaders" violate the trust that has been placed in them to, quite literally, keep the Faith; they are, therefore, unfaithful, that is, infidels. These infidels are, of course, placing themselves in utmost danger of damnation for their malfeasance in office; Our Lord told them, "You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell?"^x That, however, is a matter between each one of them and his God, the God in whom he very possibly does not really believe, the God that, at the very least, he does not believe will punish his misconduct.

These men do far more damage than what they do to themselves, however. By lying to the people of the Church, misleading them as to what they are required to do to remain in a covenant relationship with God, they are placing the souls of those people in utmost peril. It is the duty of each member of the Christian community to be vigilant for such falsehoods^{xi} and when they are discovered, loudly to denounce them. Just remember the fairy tale about the emperor's new clothes, and how only one little boy had the common sense to point to the emperor in his underwear and say, "But he's not wearing any clothes!"

Conclusion:

So all of us within the Church are obliged to listen critically to what our leaders tell us, constantly comparing what we hear with what we know has always been the teaching of the Church, its “handing over” or *tradition*.^{xii} If we should be so unfortunate as to hear something that differs from that which has been handed over to us, then we must be vigilant to challenge the innovator, demanding evidence for his claims and rebutting them with what the Church has always taught. Only thus can we keep any false shepherds from leading our sheep into desert pastures.

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September 7, 2008.

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

ⁱⁱ *Exodus 3:1-15 (KJV).*

ⁱⁱⁱ *I Peter 5:1-11 (KJV).*

^{iv} *I Peter 5: 1-2a (RSV).*

^v *Ibid. at 5:3 (RSV).*

^{vi} *Ibid. at 5: 5b-6 (RSV).*

^{vii} *Cf. St. Mark 10: 42-44; St. Luke 22: 24-26.*

^{viii} *St. Matthew 28: 19 (KJV).*

^{ix} *St. Matthew 7: 15 (KJV).*

^x *St. Matthew 23: 33 (KJV).*

^{xi} *Cf. St. Matthew 23: 3.*

^{xii} “[W]e ought, with the Lord’s help, to fortify our faith in a twofold manner, firstly, that is, by the authority of God’s Law, then by the tradition of the Catholic Church.... Now in the Catholic Church itself we take the greatest care to hold that which has been believed everywhere, always and by all.” *ST. VINCENT OF LERINS, COMMONITORIUM, Chapter 4.*

^{xiii} *Sometime Priest in Charge, St. James of Jerusalem Anglican Catholic Church, Erie PA.*