

## Sermon for Morning Prayer The Fourth Sunday After Trinity

### Lessons:

**The First Lesson:** Here beginneth the twentysecond Verse of the third Chapter of the Lamentations of Jeremiah.

“It is of the LORD’s mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness. The LORD is my portion, saith my soul; therefore will I hope in him. The LORD is good unto them that wait for him, to the soul that seeketh him. It is good that a man should both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the LORD. It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth. He sitteth alone and keepeth silence, because he hath borne it upon him. He putteth his mouth in the dust; if so be there may be hope. He giveth his cheek to him that smiteth him: he is filled full with reproach. For the LORD will not cast off for ever: But though he cause grief, yet will he have compassion according to the multitude of his mercies. For he doth not afflict willingly nor grieve the children of men.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

**The Second Lesson:** Here beginneth the twentyfourth Verse of the tenth Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Matthew.

“. . . The disciple is not above his master, nor the servant above his lord. It is enough for the disciple that he be as his master, and the servant as his lord. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebub, how much more shall they call them of his household? Fear them not therefore: for there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; and hid, that shall not be known. What I tell you in darkness, that speak ye in light: and what ye hear in the ear, that preach ye upon the housetops. And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear ye not therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows. Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven. But

whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven. Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household. He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me. He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it."

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

### **Text:**

From the Second Lesson: "A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master; it is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master." In the Name of the Father, and of the † Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

### **Introduction, Theme, and Development:**

In the current social and political climate, it is fashionable to declare that all religions are simply different paths to the same end. The underlying assumption is that the choice of one religion over another is simply an historical or cultural accident: where one is born, and in which anthropo-logical *milieu* one is raised, determines the particular faith to which one gives allegiance. By implication, therefore, all religions – or, at least, almost all – are of equal value and may equally serve the purposes for which men and women turn to religion.

Of course, this relativistic attitude can be held only by those who have ignored the clear evidence that results from even the most cursory observation of the world around us. Only one of the major world religions has produced social, cultural, and political institutions that have contributed to the increasing liberation of the human mind and spirit, to say nothing of the economic, commercial, and technological institutions that have contributed to rising standards of living, the conquest of many diseases, the lengthening of human lifespans, to say nothing of a whole host of other goods.

Indeed, wherever today we see an economic power growing in a territory still dominated by another ancient religion, as we do in China and India, we see that the economic institutions in each such resurgent territory are not native products. Instead, they are imported artifacts that have been grafted onto the original local culture. And in each of those cases we also see that these progressive institutions had their origins in, and were imported into those regions from, the areas which for centuries were the home of Christianity.

As just one example of the effects of Christian culture, think of that essential institution of any modern civilized society, the university. A modern or modernizing society without a university is unthinkable to us yet the university is purely and completely the product of the Christian Church of the West. Not only was it created exclusively by that Church, it was created for that Church's own internal purposes, most especially for the education and formation of the higher clerics and administrators needed by that Church.

In other words, the Church created the university as a direct result of the Christian religion professed and taught by that Church. All of the university's other functions and contributions are outgrowths of, and have their basic foundations in, that Church-driven mission.

Other examples could be adduced to show how the forces that over the last two millennia have caused societies to prosper, expand, and survive have generally had their origins under the aegis of Christianity. But if the effects of Christianity have been so profound for the material aspects of life, what has been their effect on the spiritual ones?

Again, let me refer to just one example out of many that could be given. Throughout human history, chattel slavery has been a marked feature of almost all higher cultures. Only one of those cultures came to see the moral necessity of abolishing that institution and of liberating its victims, and that was the Christian civilization of Western Europe.

But why did Christian civilization alone come to see the necessity of this step which now seems so obvious to almost everyone alive today? Why did neither the Confucian-Buddhist-Taoist **[DOW-ist]** culture of China, nor the Hindu-Buddhist culture of India, nor the Islamic culture of the Near and Middle East, come to this realization on its own?

The answer, I suggest, lies in the fact, recognized by Christianity almost alone among the world's faiths, that human beings are limited in what they can accomplish on their own. Even with the most skilled instruction and coaching, men and women eventually reach a plateau in their moral and spiritual understanding and accomplishment. That is why, in the metaphor used in today's Second Lesson, "A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master; it is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master."

However, we, as Christians, have been given an extraordinary means of overcoming our natural human limitations. Indeed, this assistance is, in the most literal sense possible, *super-natural*, because it goes beyond what merely natural means make possible. It is, again literally, supernatural because it comes directly from God, God who, out of his overwhelming love for us, wishes to give us what we cannot have by our own unaided efforts.

So Our Lord said, "Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me."

This is part of the process we call *perfection*, or making something more perfect than it was. In this case, it is God who perfects us, the people who, without His aid, are very imperfect indeed. This process comes about through God's accepting us, flawed though we be, and, disregarding those flaws, adopting us as His children, members of His household. As St. John puts it in a "servant" metaphor similar to St. Matthew's one that opened today's Second Lesson: "No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends; for all that I have heard from my father I have made known to you."

But what is it that induces God to choose some of us, out of the entire population of this world, and thus adopt us as members of His family, while leaving others as strangers? The answer is that He has invited *all* to take advantage of this opportunity but only *some* will respond favorably to that invitation.

Those who respond and accept the invitation are those who have faith in God and in His Christ; those who ignore the invitation are those who do not. "So every one who acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven; but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven."

St. John repeats virtually the identical assurance twice in the space of only three Chapters. First, “He who believes on [the Son] is not condemned; he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.” And then again: “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears my word, and believes him who sent me, has eternal life; he does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.”

This, then, is the secret to surpassing ourselves. We cannot, by our own unaided efforts, become the exalted moral and spiritual beings God wants us to become, the sort of people who free the captives and lift up the oppressed. That is proven by the fates of the many, many past societies that failed to free their slaves, give equal treatment to their women, or otherwise act to acknowledge the God-given value of each living person.

But, with God’s freely-given aid, we can become such persons. The first step is to believe in the One that God sent us to show us His boundless love for us: “He who believes in me, believes not in me, but in him who sent me.”

The second step is to act in accordance with that belief, to make it real by our actions in response to it. As Our Lord tells us in today’s Second Lesson: “[H]e who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. He who finds his life shall lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake shall find it.”

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*The Rev’d Canon John A. Hollister, J.D.  
July 5, 2009.*

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

*2 Lamentations 3:22-33 (KJV).*

*3 St. Matthew 10:24-39 (KJV).*

*4 St. Matthew 10:24-25b (RSV).*

*5 Other religious traditions have had their own heydays, but these all waxed, briefly throve, and then waned. China, for example, was the innovator of many important discoveries but for the past millennium or more it has merely preserved its traditional culture and neither built upon it nor extended it. So, too, with India’s much shorter cultural zenith,*

*which was already on the wane by the 17th Century. The rapid expansion, and almost equally rapid stagnation, of Islamic culture has been the subject of much recent study.*

*6 Developed in the late Eleventh and early Twelfth Centuries out of the cathedral schools in capitals such as Paris. Notably, the most important steps were taken by the individual choices of large numbers of independent scholars and students, a prime example of market forces at work.*

*7 St. Matthew 10:24-25b (RSV).*

*8 Cf. the opening prayer in The Ministration of Holy Baptism, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 273 (PECUSA 1928/1943).*

*9 St. John 15:4 (RSV).*

*10 St. John 15:15 (RSV).*

*11 St. Matthew 10:32-33 (RSV).*

*12 St. John 3:18 (RSV).*

*13 St. John 5:24 (RSV).*

*14 St. John 12:44 RSV).*

*15 St. Matthew 10:38-39 (RSV).*

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