

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER

The Sunday after Ascension Day

Lessons:

The First Lesson:ⁱ Here beginneth the third Verse of the thirty-third Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.ⁱⁱ

“The Lord is exalted; for he dwelleth on high: he hath filled Zion with judgment and righteousness. And wisdom and knowledge shall be the stability of thy times, and strength of salvation: the fear of the Lord is his treasure. Thine eyes shall see the king in his beauty: they shall behold the land that is very far off. Look upon Zion, the city of our solemnities: thine eyes shall see Jerusalem a quiet habitation, a tabernacle that shall not be taken down; not one of the stakes thereof shall ever be removed, neither shall any of the cords thereof be broken. But there the glorious Lord will be unto us a place of broad rivers and streams; wherein shall go no galley with oars, neither shall gallant ship pass thereby. For the Lord is our judge, the Lord is our lawgiver, the Lord is our king; he will save us.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson:ⁱⁱⁱ Here beginneth the twenty-sixth Verse of the fifteenth Chapter of the Gospel according to St. John.^{iv}

“When the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall testify of me: and ye also shall bear witness, because ye have been with me from the beginning.

“These things have I spoken unto you, that ye should not be offended. They shall put you out of the synagogues: yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service. And these things will they do unto you, because they have not known the Father, nor me. But these things have I told you, that when the time shall come, ye may remember that I told you of them.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Homily:

At first sight, it is not obvious that today's Second Lesson holds the seeds of the great disunity of the Church, but that merely shows how easily man can fall into folly.

In the earliest days of the Church, it was comparatively easy for the leaders of the Church to assemble to decide issues of great moment. Thus, it was in such a council in Jerusalem where it was decided that Gentiles could become Christians without first becoming Jews. And likewise the loosening of Jewish dietary laws on Gentile Christians was so decided.^v But fairly soon, the dispersion of Apostles throughout the world in missionary activity rendered such Councils difficult, and in practice they ceased before the conquest of Judea and the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD.

But that didn't eliminate the need for deciding such questions. As heresies arose, there was need for a clear mechanism to address the orthodoxy of belief which was essential to the Church's mission.

The Holy Ghost, acting in the council of Bishops as the successors to the Apostles, would correctly guide the Church.^{vi} The only problem was getting them to assemble in common council. While the Church remained proscribed by the Roman empire, this was exceedingly difficult. Indeed, it didn't happen, other than much smaller regional councils.

Not until Christianity was legalized under Constantine the Great was the first of these Great Councils held, at Nicea, with the Emperor himself presiding. Not often noticed, one aspect of arranging for this council was that the Emperor funded the various Bishops' travel. They were thus able to assemble, and address the issues of the various heresies then in full bloom. The outcome of this first Council was the formulation of a Creed which summarized the Church's common set of beliefs.^{vii} We know this as the Nicene Creed. It was modeled after the Apostle's Creed, which predated it.^{viii}

So far, all was well, but a problem developed. Exactly what happened is contentious, and how one relates the exact events suffices to

put the teller into one camp or the other. I will try to be as even-handed as possible. Many people found it difficult to accept that, after Our Lord's Incarnation, He was, and is, both truly divine and truly human.

These doubters could believe that He was divine, but not really human, or that He was human, but not really divine; the problem was getting them to accept that He was both at the same time. One of the strongest of the schools of thought that held He is human but not actually divine was led by a man named Arius and this Arian heresy became prevalent in many parts of the Church.

One of those places was Spain and the Spanish bishops tried to buttress the orthodox belief in Christ's divinity by adding one word to the Nicene Creed, a word that showed Him participating with God the Father in the divine act of sending God the Holy Spirit to the Church. This word is, in Latin, *filioque*, which translates into English as "and the Son". Thus the Creed, as amended in Spain and later adopted by the Western Church, said "I believe in the Holy Ghost ... who proceedeth from the Father and the Son." However, historically that "and the Son" was not originally part of the Creed.

Now it is the height of presumption to suppose we can know and understand the inner workings of the Trinity. Whether the Holy Ghost actually proceeds from the Father alone or from the Father and Son is, in actuality, a Holy Mystery. But the change in wording, which was never authorized by any General Council, underlies the Great Schism of 1054 that separated the Eastern/Greek Church from the Western/Roman Church through mutual anathemas pronounced by the Pope and Patriarch of Constantinople and the Pope and Patriarch of Rome.

Thereafter, each half of the Church was no longer in communion with the other. Thus the situation has remained, with but limited occasional softening of positions over the centuries.

But now, under the immense threats to the Church both from militant Mohammedans and from the militantly secular portions of Western society, we can no longer afford these "unhappy divisions". Christ established *one* Apostolic Church, not many. Christ intends the Church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to resolve its differences

and come together again in that unity which Christ gave it originally. Whether we refer to the Church as “Catholic” or “Orthodox”, we are referring to that same Apostolic Church which has existed since the first Pentecost.^{ix}

There is movement on that œcumenical front. We are in talks with the Orthodox (specifically, the Russian Orthodox) towards resolving our differences, and (perhaps) towards at least a limited intercommunion and mutual recognition. The Roman Church is unlikely to alter its stance in the short term; to that end, we may be by default the primary representatives of the Western Church in such talks.

Let us pray that we can help fashion a beginning of that reconciliation which must occur to bring the Church into mutual unity within its members, recognizing that (to use a metaphor which Jesus gave us) that, like the human body, there may be various members each with their own unique form and function, but yet one common, properly functioning, body. In Jesus’ name we pray!

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Jack M. Lloyd, PH.D.^x
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ⁱ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxiv (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*

ⁱⁱ *Isaiah 33:5-6, 17, 20-22 (KJV).*

ⁱⁱⁱ *“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).*

^{iv} *St. John 15:26—16:4a (KJV).*

^v *Acts 15:1-21.*

^{vi} *St. Luke 12:12; St. John 3:34 & 16:13; Acts 15:28; I Corinthians 2:13; I Thessalonians 1:5.*

^{vii} *“The outcome” being after its revision by the First Council of Constantinople, in 381 AD.*

^{viii} *And was itself based upon the baptismal formula, or “baptismal symbol”, the new baptizand’s profession of faith, that was used in the Church at Rome.*

^{ix} *Roman Catholics would, of course, reject any suggestion that they are not Orthodox (correct in faith) as well as Catholic (universal). And the official name used by those we call “Eastern Orthodox” is “The Holy Catholic Orthodox Church”. So each party that is a primary descendant from that Great Schism claims to be **both** Orthodox **and** Catholic; thus the two names cannot be either opposed or mutually inconsistent.*

^x *Licensed Layreader, St. Michael’s Anglican Catholic Church, Panama City, FL.*