

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER
The Second Sunday after Trinity

The Rev. Warren E. Shaw, Rector

Lessons:¹

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the twentieth Chapter of the Fifth Book of Moses, called Deuteronomy.²

“When thou goest out to battle against thine enemies, and seest horses, and chariots, and a people more than thou, be not afraid of them: for the LORD thy God is with thee, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt. And it shall be, when ye are come nigh unto the battle, that the priest shall approach and speak unto the people, And shall say unto them, Hear, O Israel, ye approach this day unto battle against your enemies: let not your hearts faint, fear not, and do not tremble, neither be ye terrified because of them; For the LORD your God is he that goeth with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you.

“And the officers shall speak unto the people, saying, What man is there that hath built a new house, and hath not dedicated it? let him go and return to his house, lest he die in the battle, and another man dedicate it. And what man is he that hath planted a vineyard, and hath not yet eaten of it? let him also go and return unto his house, lest he die in the battle, and another man eat of it. And what man is there that hath betrothed a wife, and hath not taken her? let him go and return unto his house, lest he die in the battle, and another man take her. And the officers shall speak further unto the people, and they shall say, What man is there that is fearful and fainthearted? let him go and return unto his house, lest his brethren’s heart faint as well as his heart. And it shall be, when the officers have made an end of speaking unto the people, that they shall make captains of the armies to lead the people.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the fifty-seventh Verse of the ninth Chapter of the Gospel according to St. Luke.³

“And it came to pass, that, as they went in the way, a certain man said unto him, Lord, I will follow thee whithersoever thou goest. And Jesus said unto him, Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head. And he said unto another, Follow me. But he said, Lord, suffer me first to go and bury my father. Jesus said unto him, Let the dead bury their dead: but go thou and preach the kingdom of God. And another also said, Lord, I will follow thee; but let me first go bid them farewell, which are at home at my house. And Jesus said unto him, No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Homily:

If someone wants to join the Church, do you think we should discourage him? Jesus did. Do you think we should make heavy demands upon potential members? Jesus did. Do you think we should make it as easy as possible to join the Church? Conventional wisdom says we should, but Jesus says no.

We live in a market-oriented world. Religion is looked upon in America as a commodity to be sold. The consumer-oriented church, sometimes called the welcoming church, is held up as a model for less successful churches to learn from and follow.

Jesus, however, did not found a consumer-oriented Church. He did not allow people to set their own agenda and call on him to support it. Jesus did not promise prosperity in worldly terms. He never offered support for what we call family values or for national aspirations. Instead, He redefined prosperity, He redefined the family, and He redefined the boundaries as well as the proper interests of the nation.

Jesus did not say that if you give up your sinful ways and join the church you will gain the love of your spouse and the respect of your children and find a good job. What he did say was, “Your heavenly Father knows your needs. Seek *first* the kingdom of God and *his* righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”

There are three examples in this morning's Second Lesson of how Jesus dealt with potential new members of the Church. The first encounter was with a man who said that he would follow Jesus anywhere. Jesus replied that He had no permanent home and no security to offer in this world. "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head."

Part of the American dream is to own your own home and be part of a stable community. Is there anything wrong with that? Certainly not! But if that is the most important thing in your life, if your home has first claim on your energies and your resources and your time, and if that is what you are willing to make sacrifices for, then you have made an idol of your home, and Jesus will not accept that. Jesus insists on first priority even over other worthy values. He simply will not accept whatever is left over. "You shall have no other gods before me."

A second man in this Gospel passage is invited to become a disciple. He replies that he will accept the invitation after he has taken care of some family obligations. "Let me first bury my father," he says.

Most interpreters understand this to mean that the man's father is not dead. If he were, then the son would not have been out here with Jesus. He would have been home making arrangements to bury the body within 24 hours, which is what the Jewish law requires.

The probability is that the man was unwilling to leave home as long as his father was alive. Many sons were in business with their fathers and stood to inherit the business when their fathers died. Or perhaps his father was ill or aged and the son felt an obligation to care for him. Whatever the reason, Jesus would have none of it.

James and John had walked away from their family fishing business, leaving their father in the boat by himself. This man would have to do the same if he wanted to be a disciple of Jesus: "Leave the dead" (that is the spiritually dead) "to bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God."

The history of the Church is filled with many who had to leave their families in order to follow Jesus. Their families simply were not sympathetic to the cause of Christ. Jesus declares such families to be dead. They are part of a world that has already been judged and is destined for oblivion.

Francis of Assisi was such a man. The son of a wealthy merchant, he walked away from his father with absolutely nothing. Even the clothes on his back he stripped off and donned a piece of burlap fastened with a rope.

There have been others who in less dramatic ways have turned their backs on their parents' way of life and chosen instead to follow Christ. Some have been missionaries. Some have entered religious orders. Some have simply said that they were not available for a family activity on Sunday morning because they had to be in church.

Most of us grew up in a time when such choices rarely had to be made. The institutions of society supported each other. The home and the school and the Church and the government all worked together. There were prayers at home as well as in school and at civic gatherings. Patriotism was preached in church as well as in school. A child who was disciplined in school would probably be disciplined again when he got home. Even places of business closed so that people could attend church on Good Friday as well as on Sunday.

But those days are over. The fabric of society is coming apart in our day. The church and the state and the business world and the schools and the family compete with each other for the loyalty and the time and the energy of us all. To put it another way, there are many pretenders to the throne of God, and we are being forced to choose which of them we will serve.

Anyone who thinks we can return to the former days is like the third man we meet in the gospel. He is not an evil man. He just wants to go back home for a visit.

Does this man live some distance away from the home he grew up in? Is he all wrapped up in nostalgia? The answer of Jesus would seem to suggest that he is: "No one who puts his hand to plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

We are in a situation today not unlike the situation that Jesus was in. These are apocalyptic times. An old order is passing away and a new one is being born. Jesus requires his followers today to give up *good* things; not just bad things. He requires that everything be put in a secondary position to the one overriding value of membership in the household of God. He takes very seriously the first of the Ten Commandments: “You shall have no other gods before me.”

No longer can there be divided loyalties. We can no more serve two masters than could the people to whom Jesus preached. What Jesus demanded of potential disciples in his day is what he demands of us today. He will not accept whatever we have left over after we tend to other obligations. Jesus demands to be first above all, even over good things like family and home and country. He will not be used to further anyone else’s agenda. If you want to follow him, it will have to be on his terms.

The interesting thing is that churches which demand that kind of loyalty are the churches that are growing. The consumer-oriented churches which adapt their message and their activities to whatever they think the market requires are not really thriving. They have members, but not disciples, and as a result they have such a turnover in membership that they have to keep scrambling and hustling and adjusting in order to maintain their numbers.

Jesus wants people to change. He has no interest in supporting anyone in his or her present lifestyle. He doesn't care about numbers. He is looking for quality. He demands total commitment and accepts nothing less. In declaring that the Kingdom of God is at hand, Jesus confronts everyone with a choice.

You can put Jesus out of your life altogether if you wish. He will accept that choice. You can choose to put Jesus ahead of everything else in your life. He will gladly accept that choice, provided you really mean everything. But the one choice Jesus will not accept is the choice to squeeze Him in between other values and other commitments—even good ones.

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St. David's Anglican Catholic Church
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¹ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxvi (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

² Deuteronomy 20:1-9 (KJV).

³ St. Luke 9:57-end.