

Sermon for Morning Prayer: Trinity IX

The Reverend Warren E. Shaw, Priest Associate

First Lesson: Here beginneth the fourteenth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel.

“Then came certain of the elders of Israel unto me, and sat before me. And the word of the LORD came unto me, saying, Son of man, these men have set up their idols in their heart, and put the stumblingblock of their iniquity before their face: should I be inquired of at all by them? Therefore speak unto them, and say unto them, Thus saith the Lord GOD; Every man of the house of Israel that setteth up his idols in his heart, and putteth the stumblingblock of his iniquity before his face, and cometh to the prophet; I the LORD will answer him that cometh according to the multitude of his idols; That I may take the house of Israel in their own heart, because they are all estranged from me through their idols.

“Therefore say unto the house of Israel, Thus saith the Lord GOD; Repent, and turn yourselves from your idols; and turn away your faces from all your abominations. For every one of the house of Israel, or of the stranger that sojourneth in Israel, which separateth himself from me, and setteth up his idols in his heart, and putteth the stumblingblock of his iniquity before his face, and cometh to a prophet to inquire of him concerning me; I the LORD will answer him by myself: And I will set my face against that man, and will make him a sign and a proverb, and I will cut him off from the midst of my people; and ye shall know that I am the LORD. And if the prophet be deceived when he hath spoken a thing, I the LORD have deceived that prophet, and I will stretch out my hand upon him, and will destroy him from the midst of my people Israel. And they shall bear the punishment of their iniquity: the punishment of the prophet shall be even as the punishment of him that seeketh unto him; That the house of Israel may go no more astray from me, neither be polluted any more with all their transgressions; but that they may be my people, and I may be their God, saith the Lord GOD.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

Second Lesson: Here beginneth the fourth Chapter of the First Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Thessalonians.

“Furthermore then we beseech you, brethren, and exhort you by the Lord Jesus, that as ye have received of us how ye ought to walk and to please God, so ye would abound more and more. For ye know what commandments we gave you by the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication: That every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour; Not in the lust of concupiscence, even as the Gentiles which know not God: That no man go beyond and defraud his brother in any matter: because that the Lord is the avenger of all such, as we also have forewarned you and testified. For God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness. He therefore that despiseth, despiseth not man, but God, who hath also given unto us his holy Spirit. But as touching brotherly love ye need not that I write unto you: for ye yourselves are taught of God to love one another. And indeed ye do it toward all the brethren which are in all Macedonia: but we beseech you, brethren, that ye increase more and more; And that ye study to be quiet, and to do your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you; That ye may walk honestly toward them that are without, and that ye may have lack of nothing.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the First Lesson: “Son of man, these men have set up their idols in their heart, and put the stumblingblock of their iniquity before their face: should I be inquired of at all by them?”

Body:

A man came to me one day seeking my guidance on a moral question. His wife was in a mental institution, and he wanted to know if it was alright for him to have a discreet affair. When I told him “no”, he began to argue with me.

When I reminded him of his marriage vows, “for better for worse – in sickness and in health”, he told me that he visited his wife regularly. I commended him for that. But when he argued that surely a compassionate God would understand. I assured him that God would indeed understand, but he would not approve. Rather, I suggested, God would help the man to live a life of chastity.

Well that was not the answer he wanted, so he went away dissatisfied.

Sometime later I was at a meeting with other clergy in the area, and one of them told about a similar experience.

Others told the same story. It turned out that we were all talking about the same man. He was obviously shopping around for a clergyman who would give him the answer he wanted. He was not really looking for advice; he was looking for approval of what he had already decided to do.

Something like that, I believe, is at work in the First Lesson for today.

A group of elders, leaders of the people, came to the prophet Ezekiel to inquire of the Lord. We are not told what it was that they wanted to know, but it really doesn't matter.

Ezekiel perceived that these men had no right even to be asking for divine guidance.

“These men have set up their idols in their heart . . . should I be enquired of at all by them?”

Let me unpack that for you.

First of all, idolatry is not simply worshiping a statue. It involves what St. Paul talks about in the opening chapter of Romans — placing, or attempting to place, a creature in the place of the creator.

The creature can be something that God has made, such as the earth itself together with the oceans and the sky and all the creatures that inhabit them. The religion of the great Earth Goddess and her several manifestations in trees and rocks and various animals is perhaps the oldest and most widespread of all the pagan religions. The Goddess was worshiped under many names and in many forms in the ancient Middle East and is still revered in the modern world.

An idol can also be something that we humans create ourselves — science and technology, wealth, a great institution such as a church or a government, a philosophy, a great social cause, anything for which people are willing to sacrifice.

The men who came seeking divine guidance through the prophet Ezekiel had set up various idols in their hearts.

In Biblical physiology, the heart is the seat of the will. The emotions are centered in the bowels, or as we would say in the gut. So when you have set up an idol in your heart, you have committed your will to that idol. You should know when you do that that God does not cast His pearls before swine and He does not offer guidance to those who are not committed to following His directions: “Should I be enquired of at all by them?”

The man who came to ask me about having an affair had already made up his mind what he wanted to do. The men who came to Ezekiel had likewise already decided what they wanted to do. Their wills were set, and they were set in the direction of sin. They “[have] put the stumbling block of their iniquity before their face”. They can’t see anything else.

People like that can always find somebody to tell them what they want to hear. There are always false prophets who are deceived themselves and will give false answers to those who consult them. If that’s what you want, you just have to keep looking until you find that false prophet. But hear the word of the Lord: “[T]he punishment of the prophet shall be even as the punishment of him that seeketh unto him.”

And what is that punishment? “I will cut him off from the midst of my people....”

There is no greater punishment than that. To be cut off from the midst of God’s people is once again to be cast out of Eden. To be cut off from the midst of God’s people is to be cast out of the Kingdom of God. To be cut off from God’s people is to be exiled to live among pagans, to serve their gods, and to find in the end that those gods are not gods at all but merely idols who have no power to save or to guide those who put their faith in them.

Recently my Bishop asked me if I would like to serve on a certain committee. Since he put it that way, I answered him honestly and told him “No, I would not like to do that.” Had he insisted, I would, of course, have been duty bound to obey, but he was wise enough not to insist. I am thankful he did not tell me to pray about it, because that would have meant that he wanted me to go to God and ask for guidance about something I had already decided on.

I often ask God for direction and guidance when I am perplexed. But I'm not going to insult Him by asking when I have already made up my mind.

It is my experience that many people who claim to be perplexed about the right thing to do, have already decided to do the wrong thing. Their only perplexity is about how to avoid accepting responsibility for doing what they know is wrong.

The answer that God gives to such perplexity is right here in the lesson. "Repent, and turn yourselves from your idols; and turn away your faces from all your abominations." ("Abominations", by the way, is a code word in the Bible for "Idols".)

If your heart is right, which is to say, if your will is right, you may seek the guidance of God and you will receive it. But if your will is set in opposition to the will of God, if it is oriented toward some idol, the only answer you will get from God is condemnation.

In our Prayer Book there is a prayer for divine guidance. It is to be used when you are truly perplexed. It begins by acknowledging that it is the meek who are guided by God. Those who submit themselves to him and surrender their own wills are the ones whom He will lead and direct. Those who are self-willed and refuse to submit to His will can expect only to be deceived by false prophets.

Let us pray that prayer.

"O GOD by whom the meek are guided in judgement, and light rises up in darkness for the godly; Grant us in all our doubts and uncertainties, the grace to ask what thou wouldest have us do, that the Spirit of wisdom may save us from all false choices, and that in thy light we may see light, and in thy straight path may not stumble; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*"

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*St. David's Anglican Church
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1 Ezekiel 14:1-11 (KJV).

2 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12 (KJV).

3 Ezekiel 14:3 (KJV).

4 Ezekiel 14:3 (KJV).

5 Ezekiel 14:3b (KJV).

6 Ezekiel 14:3b (KJV).

7 Ezekiel 14:10b (KJV).

8 Ezekiel 14:8b (KJV).

9 Ezekiel 14:6b (KJV).

*10 "For Guidance", in Family Prayer, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER
595 (PECUSA 1928/1943).*