

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER

Whitsunday¹

The Rev'd Warren E. Shaw, Priest-in-Charge

Lessons:²

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the twenty-eighth Verse of the second Chapter of Joel.³

“And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions: And also upon the servants and upon the handmaids in those days will I pour out my spirit. And I will shew [SHOW] wonders in the heavens and in the earth, blood, and fire, and pillars of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and terrible day of the LORD come. And it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call on the name of the LORD shall be delivered: for in mount Zion and in Jerusalem shall be deliverance, as the LORD hath said, and in the remnant whom the LORD shall call.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the eighth Chapter of the Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Romans.⁴

“There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh: That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. For they that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh; but they that are after the Spirit the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to

the law of God, neither indeed can be. So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God. But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his. And if Christ be in you, the body is dead because of sin; but the Spirit is life because of righteousness. But if the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, he that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwelleth in you.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.”⁵ In the Name of the Father, and of the son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Homily:

The Twentieth Century’s three most traditional Books of Common Prayer all give the beginning of the eighth chapter of Romans as the Second Lesson, or at least as one of the choices for the Second Lesson, at Morning Prayer on Whitsunday. Our American Prayer Book ends this Lesson with verse eleven but the Prayer Books used in Canada and in our overseas dioceses continue through verse seventeen.

Let me read you those omitted verses, from which my text this morning is taken:

“Therefore, brethren, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live after the flesh. For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live. For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God. For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father. The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: And if children,

then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together.”

Christian doctrine has always recognized two distinct levels of reality. One is the level of deity and consists of what we call “spirit”. The other is the level of creation and consists of what we call “matter”. Today’s Second Lesson is about how we, as human beings, existing on the level of creation, are taken up by the action of God into the level of deity. “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.”

In recent years, the distinction between matter and spirit has been blurred to the point where the physical universe is deemed to be coterminous with the spiritual universe. Feminist theologians, seeking new images and metaphors, have conceived of the universe as the body of God. Neo-Pantheists, Wiccans, and some environmentalists, have equated nature with God. The two levels of reality, deity and creation, have been reduced to one. The result is that the Gospel is reduced to a program for eliminating social inequities.

In this way of thinking, everyone is considered to be a child of God without any need for repentance, conversion, or transformation of any kind. That is the direction in which the culture, and churches allied with the culture, have moved in recent years. But that Gospel is a long way from what today’s Second Lesson is saying.

In order to understand what St. Paul is telling us in this passage from Romans, we have to understand the concept of adoption as it was practiced in ancient Rome.

A slave was entitled to food, clothing, shelter, and protection from harm, but was not entitled to a share of the family fortune. A son, on the other hand, was an heir and as such was entitled to the family name and to call the head of the household “Father”. He also got to eat at the family table.

Adoption was the legal process by which a slave could become a son. Adoption moved a person out of his natural relationships into a

new set of relationships that redefined his identity. The adopted son was now entitled to the family name and to call the head of the household, “Father”. He was also entitled to a share of the family inheritance.

That, according to St. Paul, is what Christ has done for us. He has moved us out of our old relationship with the world and moved us into a new relationship with God. So we no longer owe an allegiance to the world of the flesh but rather to the world of the spirit into which we have been adopted.

Not everyone is adopted because not everyone is led by the spirit of God. Many people are led by the spirit of the age, whatever it happens to be at the time. Some are led by their own physical desires. Some are led by addictions or obsessive compulsions. Some are led by the search for respect and approval. Some are led by an urgent desire for territory or for power. Such people are part of the household of God but they are not “heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ”. They do not call God their father and they do not subject themselves to His discipline and direction.

To be led by the Spirit of God is to live in a counter-cultural way. To be led by the Spirit of God is to cultivate relationships of mutuality rather than dominance. To be led by the Spirit of God is to subordinate your natural urges to a sense of discipline and duty. To be led by the Spirit of God is to place the needs of others ahead of your own desires and make sacrifices for the common good. To be led by the Spirit of God is to follow Christ to His Cross and claim the inheritance of glory. To be led by the Spirit is to enter into the life of the Trinity itself as a brother or sister of Christ and an obedient child of the Father. St. Paul says that when we do those things, our status as the adopted children of God is confirmed.

“When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order to be glorified with him.”

Being led by the Spirit is not a static concept. It is an ongoing activity that involves progressive change. The demands of the flesh continue to be made. Our former relationships continue to distract us. That is why we need to remind ourselves that we are no longer under any obligation to act on them.

If you sell your house, you are no longer obliged to pay the taxes on that house. If you sell your car, you are no longer obligated to pay the insurance. You may still get bills, but you send them back with a notation that you don't have to pay them anymore.

So it is with the needs that we feel for power or prestige or sex or territory or for alcohol or any other addiction. No one can help feeling the urges of the flesh, but the children of God do not have to act upon those urges. We are no longer debtors to the flesh to live according to its demands. We are the adopted children of God, and by the power of the Spirit, we are able, little by little to "put to death the deeds of the body."

Over time an amazing thing happens. As we deny the deeds, the urges gradually lose their strength. As we follow the leading of the Spirit we find ourselves more and more being shaped in the image of Christ, the eternal Son of God. That is when we recognize that God is indeed our father, and that we are the heirs of all that belongs to him, which is everything.

There are people who say that the image of God as father is outdated in this age of sexual equality and single-parent families. There are people whose experience with their earthly father has been harmful and unpleasant. Let me say something about that.

Our heavenly Father is not a projection of our earthly fathers. Abba is the perfect Father, the ideal Father, the Father who does all that every earthly father is supposed to do. He never abandons His children. He protects us, He provides for our needs, and He teaches us how to become the very best that we can be. He disciplines us with love. He cries when we cry and He smiles when we succeed.

All the fathers on earth are imperfect reflections of God. Some are more imperfect than others. But those earthly fathers who have dishonored the concept of fatherhood must not be allowed to deprive us of the knowledge that we have a good Father in heaven. In fact it is all the more important for someone who has not had a good father on earth to know that he has a good Father in heaven who has adopted him as His own child.

You still have a choice, however. You do not have to accept your status as a child of God. You can live as a cosmic orphan if you wish. You can live entirely within the physical level of reality if you so choose. But you do not have to.

When you were baptized, God adopted you as His child. We are the brothers and sisters of Christ, and we are heirs with Him of glory. Let us live, then, as befits the sons and daughters of God. Let us live as we have an example in Christ. Let us honor the Father who loves us. Let us follow the leading of the Spirit whom God has sent to bring us to His kingdom, which is also our kingdom. “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.”

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St. David's Anglican Catholic Church
Charlottesville, Virginia

July 29, 2012

¹ This sermon was originally written on the Epistle for Holy Communion on the Eighth Sunday after Trinity, 2012.

² *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxiv (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

³ Joel 2:28-end (KJV).

⁴ Romans 8:1-17 (KJV).

⁵ Romans 8:14 (RSV).