

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER The Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity¹

Lessons:

The First Lesson:² Here beginneth the twenty-fourth Chapter of the Book of Job.³

“Why, seeing times are not hidden from the Almighty, do they that know him not see his days? Some remove the landmarks; they violently take away flocks, and feed thereof. They drive away the ass of the fatherless, they take the widow’s ox for a pledge. They turn the needy out of the way: the poor of the earth hide themselves together. Behold, as wild asses in the desert, go they forth to their work; rising betimes for a prey: the wilderness yieldeth food for them and for their children. They reap every one his corn in the field: and they gather the vintage of the wicked. They cause the naked to lodge without clothing, that they have no covering in the cold. They are wet with the showers of the mountains, and embrace the rock for want of a shelter. They pluck the fatherless from the breast, and take a pledge of the poor. They cause him to go naked without clothing, and they take away the sheaf from the hungry; Which make oil within their walls, and tread their wine presses, and suffer thirst. Men groan from out of the city, and the soul of the wounded crieth out: yet God layeth not folly to them. They are of those that rebel against the light; they know not the ways thereof, nor abide in the paths thereof. The murderer rising with the light killeth the poor and needy, and in the night is as a thief. The eye also of the adulterer waiteth for the twilight, saying, No eye shall see me: and disguiseth his face. In the dark they dig through houses, which they had marked for themselves in the daytime: they know not the light. For the morning is to them even as the shadow of death: if one know them, they are in the terrors of the shadow of death.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson:⁴ Here beginneth the ninth Chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew.⁵

“Jesus entered into a ship, and passed over, and came into his own city. And, behold, they brought to him a man sick of the palsy, lying on a bed: and Jesus, seeing their faith, said unto the sick of the palsy; Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee. And, behold, certain of the scribes said within themselves, This man

blasphemeth. And Jesus knowing their thoughts said, Wherefore think ye evil in your hearts? For whether is easier, to say, Thy sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Arise, and walk? But that ye may know that the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins, (then saith [SETH] he to the sick of the palsy,) Arise, take up thy bed, and go unto thine house. And he arose, and departed to his house. But when the multitudes saw it, they marvelled, and glorified God, which had given such power unto men.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Gospel: “*And, behold, they brought to him a man sick of the palsy, lying on a bed: and Jesus, seeing their faith, said unto the sick of the palsy; Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee. And, behold, certain of the scribes said within themselves, This man blasphemeth. And Jesus knowing their thoughts said, Wherefore think ye evil in your hearts? For whether is easier, to say, Thy sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Arise, and walk?*”⁶ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Homily:

Why indeed, would the scribes be so offended by Jesus’ simple statement, “*Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee*”?⁷ The answer lies in their dedication to the rejection of Jesus Christ as the Son of God and their bitter battle to hang on to power. They, like their masters, the rulers of Israel—the Pharisees and Sadducees—had already rejected Christ as Lord.

Jesus had made it clear already that His kingdom was not one on earth, such as they sought, but rather one in heaven, which they could hardly comprehend. Further, Jesus preached a new Gospel that rejected in almost its entirety the strictly-regimented, legalistic structure that the leaders of the Jewish state had developed, insisting instead on focusing on God’s intent to forge a vibrant, living relationship with His people.

Rather than depending on the written law, which He said leads to death, Jesus urged His followers to instead depend on a personal relationship with God and on

His forgiveness. He preached reliance on the living spirit of the law rather than on the dead letter of the law.

What forgiveness of sin existed in the Jewish world could occur only through the mediation of the priests, which involved making extensive and expensive sacrifices at the Temple—a venue which was available only to those who lived within travelling distance of Jerusalem or who had enough wealth to be able to make the long and expensive journey there. The priests and other leaders could not know that the most expensive sacrifice there could ever be was soon to come, which would result in the ransoming of all believers from their debt of sin.

That sacrifice, of course, would be made by the Son of God Himself, Jesus Christ, as He freely gave Himself to pay that debt for all time. As Jesus forgave the sins of the man with palsy, He would soon grant forgiveness to all who believe in Him.

We remember the account of how Jesus, finding merchants selling sacrificial stock and exchanging money in the Temple courtyard, became outraged at the desecration of the Temple and literally threw the merchants and their wares out of the sacred precincts.

The Pharisees' excessive legalism had rendered receiving this absolution nearly impossible for many people. The rules of the Pharisees had placed money, political influence and favoritism in the way of the people's relationship with God. Those restrictions gave the ruling classes almost unquestioned power and influence in Jewish society. When Jesus came along, offering the people a direct relationship with God and a rejection of the traditional power base, the rulers saw that offer as a threat to all they had accumulated.

If Jesus could forgive sin, then there was no further need for the ruling class of Israel, because a direct path to God was now available to the people. Jesus was Himself that path. If the leaders of society could not discredit Him, then their grasp on power was lost. So in today's reading, when Jesus acts again to provide that direct link to God, the rulers are again outraged. They know they dare not challenge Jesus openly and directly, for the crowds who witnessed Jesus' miracles would surely rise up against them in such a case and remove them.

So they privately doubt and question Him, and accuse Jesus of blasphemy by implying that He can forgive sin. Jesus, however, knew their thoughts, and called them out on them. *“Wherefore think ye evil in your hearts? For whether is easier, to say, Thy sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Arise, and walk?”*⁸

Why do you hold such evil in your hearts? Why do you question the forgiveness of sin? Why do you secretly hope that sin may not be forgiven this poor man? Jesus’ challenge directly confronts the motivations of the scribes. They, of course, could not answer, for if they publically said that they would rather the crippled man remain crippled in order merely to discredit Jesus, then the crowd would have turned against them.

In the face of their silence, Jesus took His proof to the next level. In order to prove to them—and to those who would later hear of these events—Jesus healed the man of palsy, ordering him to pick up his bed and go home—he did. The scribes, while bested on this occasion, could not yet release their tenuous hold on illegitimate power, but continued to try to tempt and trap Jesus. The crowd who witnessed these events had a very different reaction. We are told they marveled and glorified God that such powers might be given to men.

Theirs was the reaction that we might have expected from any rational person—and certainly from anyone who with an open mind considered the events. Only one consumed with evil could object to another’s forgiveness. Only One dedicated to God could forgive so powerfully.

Let us pray.

Dear Lord, guide us always in the paths of forgiveness, of love and thanksgiving, as we strive to model our lives after Your life. Free us from whatever evil, malcontent or envy that might stand in our way that as the man with palsy we might stand and walk in Your paths always. This we pray through Your everlasting mercy. Amen.

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¹ This sermon was originally written on the Gospel for Holy Communion on the Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity, 2013.

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

³ Job 24:1-17 (KJV).

⁴ “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).

⁵ St. Matthew 9:1-8 (KJV).

⁶ St. Matthew 9:2-4 (KJV).

⁷ St. Matthew 9:2 (KJV).

⁸ St. Matthew 9:4-5 (KJV).

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