

**SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER
THE SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY**

Lessons:¹

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the second Chapter of Micah.²

“Woe to them that devise iniquity, and work evil upon their beds! when the morning is light, they practise it, because it is in the power of their hand. And they covet fields, and take them by violence; and houses, and take them away: so they oppress a man and his house, even a man and his heritage.³ Therefore thus saith [SETH] the LORD; Behold, against this family do I devise an evil, from which ye shall not remove your necks; neither shall ye go haughtily: for this time is evil.

“In that day shall one take up a parable against you, and lament with a doleful lamentation, and say, We be utterly spoiled: he hath changed the portion of my people: how hath he removed it from me! turning away he hath divided our fields. Therefore thou shalt have none that shall cast a cord by lot in the congregation of the LORD. Prophecy ye not, say they to them that prophesy: they shall not prophesy to them, that they shall not take shame.

“O thou that art named the house of Jacob, is the spirit of the LORD straitened? are these his doings? do not my words do good to him that walketh uprightly? Even of late my people is risen up as an enemy: ye pull off the robe with the garment from them that pass by securely as men averse from war. The women of my people have ye cast out from their pleasant houses; from their children have ye taken away my glory for ever. Arise ye, and depart; for this is not your rest: because it is polluted, it shall destroy you, even with a sore destruction. If a man walking in the spirit and falsehood do lie, saying, I will prophesy unto thee of wine and of strong drink; he shall even be the prophet of this people.

“I will surely assemble, O Jacob, all of thee; I will surely gather the remnant of Israel; I will put them together

as the sheep of Bozrah [BAHZ-ruh],⁴ as the flock in the midst of their fold: they shall make great noise by reason of the multitude of men. The breaker is come up before them: they have broken up, and have passed through the gate, and are gone out by it: and their king shall pass before them, and the LORD on the head of them.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the twenty-fourth Verse of the fifth Chapter of the Gospel According to St. John.⁵

“... Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life. Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live. For as the Father hath life in himself; so hath he given to the Son to have life in himself; And hath given him authority to execute judgment also, because he is the Son of man. Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation. I can of mine own self do nothing: as I hear, I judge: and my judgment is just; because I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me. If I bear witness of myself, my witness is not true.

“There is another that beareth witness of me; and I know that the witness which he witnesseth of me is true. Ye sent unto John, and he bare witness unto the truth. But I receive not testimony from man: but these things I say, that ye might be saved. He was a burning and a shining light: and ye were willing for a season to rejoice in his light.

“But I have greater witness than that of John: for the works which the Father hath given me to finish, the same

³ Cf. 1 Kings 21:1-19.

⁴ W. MURRAY SEVERANCE, PRONOUNCING BIBLE NAMES 25 (Holman Bible Publishers, 1985).

⁵ St. John 5:24-47 (KJV).

⁶ St. John 5:25 (RSV).

⁷ Jesus Christ *is* the Word of God; cf. St. John 1:1-4.

⁸ St. John 5:26-27 (RSV).

⁹ St. John 5:28-29 (RSV).

¹⁰ Priest Assistant, Christ Anglican Catholic Church, Metairie LA; Honorary Canon, the Diocese of the Resurrection; Honorary Canon and Canon to the Ordinary, The Diocese of New Orleans, The Anglican Catholic Church.

Conclusion:

Thus you have before you two stark choices. You can believe those who tell you that you are just fine as you are now and that you need exert no effort to conform yourself to God's will or to perfect yourself as a Christian. In fact, they tell you, you do not even need to be a Christian in order to be saved.

If you believe these reassuring folks, you have nothing to worry about and need do nothing to align yourself with God's plans for you. Of course, if you are wrong in your assumptions, this program will lead you to disaster, but it is your choice whether to take that risk.

On the other hand, if you think, or even suspect, that sixty generations of Christians might be correct, then you will want to seek out what is God's will for you, so that you can cooperate with that will to the greatest extent that is within your power. If the "I'm O.K., you're O.K." crowd turns out to be correct, you will have lost nothing by that effort. If that reassuring crowd turns out to be wrong, however, by this course of action you will have put yourself in a much better posture for facing that Judgement that today's Second Lesson assures you is coming down upon you.

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The Rev'd Canon John A. Hollister¹⁰
February 13, 2011.

¹ *An Alternative Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised in 1928)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER, WITH THE ADDITIONS AND DEVIATIONS PROPOSED IN 1928 33 (Canterbury Press 2008); *The Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised In 1928)*, A BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxv (South Africa 1954); *A Table of Lessons (authorized by the Episcopal Synod)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxiii (CIPBC 1963).

² Micah 2:1-13 (KJV).

works that I do, bear witness of me, that the Father hath sent me. And the Father himself, which hath sent me, hath borne witness of me. Ye have neither heard his voice at any time, nor seen his shape. And ye have not his word abiding in you: for whom he hath sent, him ye believe not.

"Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me. And ye will not come to me, that ye might have life. I receive not honour from men. But I know you, that ye have not the love of God in you. I am come in my Father's name, and ye receive me not: if another shall come in his own name, him ye will receive. How can ye believe, which receive honour one of another, and seek not the honour that cometh from God only? Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father: there is one that accuseth you, even Moses, in whom ye trust. For had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me; for he wrote of me. But if ye believe not his writings, how shall ye believe my words?"

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: "Truly, truly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live."⁶ In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Homily:

St. John's words here, about those who are "dead" who may nevertheless "live", have two meanings. In one sense, he means that those who are *spiritually* dead but who hear the Word of God – that is, hear Jesus Christ⁷ – will become spiritually alive. In the other sense, he refers to the fact that those who have heard and heeded the Word of God

will, after they are *physically* dead, be resurrected to eternal life.

There are two important conclusions to be drawn from these facts, conclusions that wise Christians will incorporate into their decisions about how they wish to live their lives here on earth.

1. God the Father has appointed God the Son to be the Great Judge of the world.

All too often, we here people talk about the “Judgment Day” as a figure of speech for something that will never come. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Scripture assures us of two things about that Judgment: one is that it *will* come and the other is that, no matter what anyone says to the contrary, we cannot and will not know when it is coming until it has actually happened. Thus all who claim to know when it will occur, or what Christ will be doing as it occurs, or after it occurs, is a false prophet.

The reality of this Judgment, the certainty of its coming, is attested to in today’s Second Lesson in these words: “For as the Father has life in himself, so has he granted the Son also to have life in himself, and has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of man.”⁸

Either that means what it says or it does not. If Scripture means what it says, then that is something you must take into account in making your life decisions. If Scripture does not mean what it says, or if it says what we hear it to say but it is not telling us the truth, then what are you doing wasting your time, sitting here and listening to a sermon that is based on that same Scripture? Obviously, your presence here is evidence that you at least suspect that Scripture is telling you the truth, and that is something you need to consider carefully.

2. Christ’s Judgement will reward some with eternal life and will punish some with eternal separation from God.

Nowadays, many who hold themselves out as Christian leaders tell us that “judgement” is an old-fashioned idea, actually an obsolete one. They tell us that everyone of good will shall be saved, regardless of whether he or she actually believes in God, let alone in Christ. All that is required is a sort of abstract, general benevolence, something even more tenuous than Adolf von Harnack’s infamous “social gospel”, which was summarized as “the brotherhood of man and the fatherhood of God”.

But this sort of Universalism, the doctrine that all will be saved regardless, is *not* any Christian belief. Quite the contrary. Christianity teaches that only some will be saved and others will not, because not everyone will respond favorably to Our Lord’s invitation. Therefore, the Church has traditionally been careful on at least certain occasions, such as at funerals and during Lent and Advent, to remind us of some realities about which we would usually prefer not to think.

It calls these important realities “the Four Last Things”, meaning the very last things that occur during one’s life here on earth. These Four Last Things are Death, Judgment, Heaven, and Hell. So today’s Second Lesson tells us that upon Christ’s next coming, we *will* be resurrected in our bodies and then we will each stand before Him for his Judgment upon us and upon our lives here: “Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come forth, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment.”⁹