

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER
The First Sunday after the Epiphany¹

Lessons:²

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the sixth Verse of the forty-fourth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.³

“... Thus saith [SETH] the LORD the King of Israel, and his redeemer the LORD of hosts; I am the first, and I am the last; and beside me there is no God. And who, as I, shall call, and shall declare it, and set it in order for me, since I appointed the ancient people? and the things that are coming, and shall come, let them shew [SHOW] unto them. Fear ye not, neither be afraid: have not I told thee from that time, and have declared it? ye are even my witnesses. Is there a God beside me? yea, there is no God; I know not any.

“They that make a graven image are all of them vanity; and their delectable things shall not profit; and they are their own witnesses; they see not, nor know; that they may be ashamed. Who hath formed a god, or molten a graven image that is profitable for nothing? Behold, all his fellows shall be ashamed: and the workmen, they are of men: let them all be gathered together, let them stand up; yet they shall fear, and they shall be ashamed together. The smith with the tongs both worketh in the coals, and fashioneth it with hammers, and worketh it with the strength of his arms: yea, he is hungry, and his strength faileth: he drinketh no water, and is faint. The carpenter stretcheth out his rule; he marketh it out with a line; he fitteth it with planes, and he marketh it out with the compass, and maketh it after the figure of a man, according to the beauty of a man; that it may remain in the house. He heweth him down cedars, and taketh the cypress and the oak, which he strengtheneth for himself among the trees of the forest: he planteth an ash, and the rain doth nourish it. Then shall it be for a man to burn: for he will take thereof, and warm himself; yea, he kindleth it, and baketh bread; yea, he maketh a god, and worshipping it; he maketh it a graven image, and falleth down thereto. He burneth

part thereof in the fire; with part thereof he eateth flesh; he roasteth roast, and is satisfied: yea, he warmeth himself, and saith, Aha, I am warm, I have seen the fire: And the residue thereof he maketh a god, even his graven image: he falleth down unto it, and worshippeth it, and prayeth unto it, and saith, Deliver me; for thou art my god. They have not known nor understood: for he hath shut their eyes, that they cannot see; and their hearts, that they cannot understand. And none considereth in his heart, neither is there knowledge nor understanding to say, I have burned part of it in the fire; yea, also I have baked bread upon the coals thereof; I have roasted flesh, and eaten it: and shall I make the residue thereof an abomination? shall I fall down to the stock of a tree? He feedeth on ashes: a deceived heart hath turned him aside, that he cannot deliver his soul, nor say, Is there not a lie in my right hand? Remember these, O Jacob and Israel; for thou art my servant: I have formed thee; thou art my servant: O Israel, thou shalt not be forgotten of me. I have blotted out, as a thick cloud, thy transgressions, and, as a cloud, thy sins: return unto me; for I have redeemed thee. Sing, O ye heavens; for the LORD hath done it: shout, ye lower parts of the earth: break forth into singing, ye mountains, O forest, and every tree therein: for the LORD hath redeemed Jacob, and glorified himself in Israel. Thus saith the LORD, thy redeemer, and he that formed thee from the womb, I am the LORD that maketh all things; that stretcheth forth the heavens alone; that spreadeth abroad the earth by myself; That frustrateth the tokens of the liars, and maketh diviners mad; that turneth wise men backward, and maketh their knowledge foolish; That confirmeth the word of his servant, and performeth the counsel of his messengers; that saith [SETH] to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be inhabited; and to the cities of Judah, Ye shall be built, and I will raise up the decayed places thereof: That saith [SETH] to the deep, Be dry, and I will dry up thy rivers: That saith [SETH] of Cyrus, He is my shepherd, and shall perform all my pleasure: even saying to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be built; and to the temple, Thy foundation shall be laid.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

do. Church treasurers find those pledge cards very useful in preparing a budget for the coming year.

It is more blessed to give than to receive.¹¹ What you give honors God. What you give extends the witness of our Church, so that we, like John the Baptist, make straight the way of the Lord. What you give strengthens the moral fabric of our Country. What you give sets an example for your family. What you give enriches you. Giving as we should deepens our trust in God, “who loves a cheerful giver.”¹²

May God inspire you to be sacrificial in your giving to the Church in the coming year. Thank you one and all for what you have generously given to date, of your time and talent, as well as your treasure.

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The Rt. Rev'd Paul C. Hewett, SSC¹³
December 18, 2011

¹ This sermon was originally written on the Gospel for the Fourth Sunday in Advent, 2011.

² *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 32 (Canterbury Press 2008); *The Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised In 1928)*, A BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxiii (South Africa 1954); *A Table of Lessons (authorized by the Episcopal Synod)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxi (CIPBC 1963).

³ Isaiah 44:6-28 (KJV).

⁴ St. John 1:19-34 (KJV).

⁵ *I.e.*, Isaiah.

⁶ *I.e.*, Isaiah; *cf.* Isaiah 40:3.

⁷ St. John 1:23 (KJV).

⁸ Malachi 3:9-11 (KJV).

⁹ I Corinthians 9:6 (KJV).

¹⁰ Proverbs 3:9-10 (KJV).

¹¹ Acts 20:35.

¹² I Corinthians 9:7 (KJV).

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the nineteenth Verse of the first Chapter of the Gospel According to St. John.⁴

“And this is the record of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, Who art thou? And he confessed, and denied not; but confessed, I am not the Christ. And they asked him, What then? Art thou Elias? And he saith, I am not. Art thou that prophet? And he answered, No. Then said they unto him, Who art thou? that we may give an answer to them that sent us. What sayest thou of thyself? He said, I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Esaias⁵ [**ee-ZYE-uss**]. And they which were sent were of the Pharisees. And they asked him, and said unto him, Why baptizest thou then, if thou be not that Christ, nor Elias, neither that prophet? John answered them, saying, I baptize with water: but there standeth one among you, whom ye know not; He it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe’s latchet I am not worthy to unloose. These things were done in Bethabara [**beth-AH-ba-rah**] beyond Jordan, where John was baptizing.

“The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world. This is he of whom I said, After me cometh a man which is preferred before me: for he was before me. And I knew him not: but that he should be made manifest to Israel, therefore am I come baptizing with water. And John bare record, saying, I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode upon him. And I knew him not: but he that sent me to baptize with water, the same said unto me, Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending, and remaining on him, the same is he which baptizeth with the Holy Ghost. And I saw, and bare record that this is the Son of God.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Esaias.^{6,7} In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Homily:

Every feast has a steward. Every large airplane, every passenger ship, has stewards and stewardesses. An umpire at a baseball or football game is a steward. A young woman holding her baby may sense that she is the stewardess of the mystery of new life.

John the Baptist was a steward of the mysteries of God. When the priests and Levites from Jerusalem asked him, “Who are you?” John quoted the prophet Isaiah and said, “I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord.” Our vocation is like that of John the Baptist: to make straight the way of the Lord. In doing so we become faithful stewards.

Stewardship means recognizing that everything we are and have comes from God, and belongs to God. Our money and our possessions belong to Him, and we are stewards of them. (In the late 70s a very wealthy woman helped start a new parish on her magnificent estate in Rye, New York. She was up early every morning and at her desk, to oversee the affairs of this vast estate, and other satellite estates. She was a believing, tithing Christian who said, “None of this is mine. It is all the Lord’s. I am the stewardess of it.”)

Stewardship also means that we are accountable to God for what we do with what He has given to us. So being a trustworthy steward means giving something back to God, and giving to God brings us closer to Him. He calls us in the Old Testament to tithe. In Malachi we read, “Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove

me now herewith, saith the Lord of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it.”⁸

The Biblical standard for giving to the Lord is the tithe, ten percent of our gross income. That is whole-hearted giving, and God blesses it, on a principle of “flowing.” The more that flows to Him, the more that flows back. The more you use a muscle, the stronger it grows. The more you develop your mind, the more knowledgeable and wise you become. If we’re not tithing now, we can work up to it, and experience the joy of God giving back to us more than we ever gave to Him.

In the Old Testament God tells us to give a tithe of 10% and live on the remaining ninety, although with the blessings God pours out, we never miss the ten, and even see an expansion of income. In the New Testament, now that our heavenly Father has given us completely of Himself through His Son, in the Holy Spirit, the standard for giving is 100%. We are to consecrate all that we are and have to our Lord, since it is all His anyway, and let Him give us back the 90%, or whatever per cent He wants to give back. We cannot outdo God in generosity.

“He that soweth bountifully shall reap also bountifully.”⁹ You can embrace this kingdom thinking now, enthusiastically, or work up to it gradually. If you are giving 5% now, add 1% to it every year, until you are tithing. Or give 10% or some per cent after deducting certain things such as taxes, mortgage or college tuition.

God’s Word teaches us to “Honour the Lord with thy substance, and with the first-fruits of all thine increase: so shall thy barns be filled with plenty, and thy presses shall burst out with new wine.”¹⁰ Give God the first-fruits, not what is left over. Write your first check each month to Christ’s Church. And do please fill out a pledge card, as very many churchmen