

SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYER Good Friday¹

Lessons:²

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the thirteenth Verse of the fifty-second Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.³

“Behold, my servant shall deal prudently, he shall be exalted and extolled, and be very high. As many were astonished at thee; his visage was so marred more than any man, and his form more than the sons of men: So shall he sprinkle many nations; the kings shall shut their mouths at him: for that which had not been told them shall they see; and that which they had not heard shall they consider.

“Who hath believed our report? and to whom is the arm of the LORD revealed? For he shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground: he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him. He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

“Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth. He was taken from prison and from judgment: and who shall declare his generation? for he was cut off out of the land of the living: for the transgression of my people was he stricken. And he made his grave with the wicked,

and with the rich in his death; because he had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth.

“Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hand. He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied: by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities. Therefore will I divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he hath poured out his soul unto death: and he was numbered with the transgressors; and he bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the eleventh Verse of the second Chapter of First Epistle General of St. Peter.⁴

“... Dearly beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul; Having your conversation honest among the Gentiles: that, whereas they speak against you as evildoers, they may by your good works, which they shall behold, glorify God in the day of visitation. Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme; Or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well. For so is the will of God, that with well doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men: As free, and not using your liberty for a cloke of maliciousness, but as the servants of God. Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the king. Servants, be subject to your masters with all fear; not only to the good and gentle, but also to the froward. For this is thankworthy, if a man for conscience toward God endure grief, suffering wrongfully. For what glory is it, if, when ye be buffeted for your faults,

however little distinction there may be between them in practice.

Conclusion:

So what St. Peter is telling us in today’s Epistle is that there is no cause for self-congratulations when we suffer patiently harms that are inflicted on us but which we deserve because they are the legitimate punishments for our own choices, that is, that we have properly brought upon ourselves. Rather, what is the Christian virtue is to suffer patiently the wrongs which other people have inflicted on us but which we do not ourselves deserve, precisely as our Lord suffered torture and death for crimes He had not committed.

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The Rev’d Canon John A. Hollister⁸
April 22, 2012

¹ This sermon was originally written on the Epistle for Mass on the Second Sunday after Easter, 2012.

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

³ Isaiah 52:13—53:end (KJV).

⁴ I Peter 2:11-end (KJV).

⁵ I Peter 2:19-20 (RSV).

⁶ St. Matthew 15:18-20a (RSV); cf. James 4:1-3 & 17.

⁷ I John 3:10 (RSV).

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That means, of course, that the second great subcategory of “evil” is composed of those unfortunate events that *do* occur through human moral agency, that is, as the result of human choices. You will recall how our Lord taught that “[W]hat ... proceeds from the heart ... defiles a man. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a man....”⁶

It is these *moral evils*, these consequences of deliberate human action, to which St. Peter was referring in today’s Epistle. For we do not ascribe the qualities of “just” and “unjust” to actions or events over which people have no control. Clearly, Peter was telling us that we are to suffer patiently when we suffer through the unjust—that is, impliedly, chosen but improperly chosen—actions of others, for there can be no merit—which is a moral quality—in suffering patiently when our own wrongdoing has brought that suffering down upon us.

It is this narrower subcategory category, that of “moral evils”, which most closely approaches equality with the concept of “sin”, although even then those two are not precisely the same. For “sin” means our willful misconduct that has one additional component, namely, that it tends to separate us from fellowship with God. As St. John tells us, “By this it may be seen who are the children of God; and who are the children of the devil: whosoever does not do right is not of God, nor he who does not love his brother.”⁷

Usually, any wrongdoing towards others also means some form of disobedience toward God. Where God has enjoined us to live in love with our fellow humans, it is difficult to think of a *moral evil*, that is, a conscious human choice to do harm, that does not also possess that aspect of disobedience. Nevertheless, at least in theory, the two notions of “moral evil” and of “sin” are not precisely identical,

ye shall take it patiently? but if, when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God. For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps: Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously: Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed. For ye were as sheep going astray; but are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Epistle: “For one is approved if, mindful of God, he endures pain while suffering unjustly. For what credit is it, if when you do wrong and are beaten for it, you take it patiently? But if when you do right and suffer for it you take it patiently, you have God’s approval.⁵” In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Introduction:

St. Peter tells us to suffer unjust wrongs with patience. But this raises an interesting question: just what does he mean by “unjust wrongs”? To answer that really means we need to take a look at the whole idea of “wrongs” or “evils”.

Theme:

In that connection, there is a 1971 rock-and-roll song that was written by Don McLean as a tribute to Buddy Holly, the famous singer who was killed in a 1959 airplane crash.

This work is named after the opening words of its refrain, “Bye, bye, Miss American Pie...”; I was in junior high school when Buddy Holly died and was several years out of college when that song about him became a hit, so I well remember both the news reports of the one and hearing the original release of the other.

And when “*American Pie*” was released, I was over 21 years of age, that is, old enough to drink whiskey, but not so old that drinking it was not still something of a novelty. So I was perhaps a bit focused on that subject, and as soon as I heard McLean’s chorus, I heard a significant logical fallacy that is contained in the lyrics. In fact, I myself call this particular error of thinking “the *American Pie* fallacy”. It appears in the lines of the chorus that say, “Drove a Chevy to the levee but the levee was dry. The good old men were drinking whiskey and rye....”

Development:

You will already be familiar with a related logical error which occurs when someone tries to aggregate unrelated qualities and which is summarized by the familiar phrase, “That’s mixing apples and oranges”. Using this familiar image, the *American Pie* fallacy can be summarized by saying, “That’s mixing apples and fruit”. For what Don McLean got wrong is that while all rye is whiskey, not all whiskey is rye; instead, “whiskey” is the more inclusive category and “rye” is a subcategory within “whiskey”.

In fact, not everything that passes as “rye” is rye, but that is a topic for another occasion. We are in church, not at a seminar on spirituous liquors. So we must note that, just as Don McLean’s search for appropriate rhymes led him to confuse the respective comprehensiveness of the different categories “rye” and “whiskey”, so, too, many people searching for spiritual guidance confuse the different categories “evil”

and “sin”. There is much evil in this world and much of that evil is also sinful, but evil and sin are not equivalents.

Rather, as with apples and fruit or rye and whiskey, we must recognize that all sin is evil but not all evils are sinful. Like “fruit” and “whiskey”, “evil” is the more inclusive category; so, too, like “apples” and “rye”, “sin” is the more specialized subcategory within “evil”.

So, if you have been following my argument, by this time you are certainly asking yourselves, “If ‘evil’ and ‘sin’ are not the same, then what does he mean by ‘evil’, and what does he mean by ‘sin’?”

The differences between those two are simple but profound. First, let us look at the more comprehensive category, that of “evil”. Simply put, evil is anything that does us harm or damage. Now there are two great subcategories within evil and the way to determine in which of those subcategories a particular form of harm belongs is to answer the question, “Was human volition, that is, voluntary human choice, was involved in causing that particular harm?”

For there are many types of harm that happen in this world without any human intentions, but rather as the inevitable results of living in a physical world that is populated by people who possess free will. Wildfires—at least the ones that are not the result of arson or recklessness—, storms, landslides, epidemics: all these are harmful, and very much to be prevented whenever possible, but they are not the consequences of anyone’s choices.

So they are what philosophers call *pre-moral* evils or, sometimes, *ontic* evils. Absent from them is any specific human actor whom we could call their *moral agent*. So the first great subcategory of the larger class “evil” is composed of those unfortunate events that occur without conscious human agency.