

The Rev'd Canon John A. Hollister¹⁰
March 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 34 (Canterbury Press 2008); *The Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised In 1928)*, A BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxvi (South Africa 1954); *A Table of Lessons (authorized by the Episcopal Synod)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxiv (CIPBC 1963).

² *Ecclesiasticus* 2:1-18 (KJV).

³ St. Matthew 3:1-end (KJV).

⁴ *I.e.*, Isaiah.

⁵ W. MURRAY SEVERANCE, PRONOUNCING BIBLE NAMES 32 (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 1985).

⁶ Hebrews 6:1-end (KJV).

⁷ *Wisdom* 2:1 (KJV).

⁸ *Articles of Religion*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 604 (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

⁹ St. Matthew 28:19-20.

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.

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER THE FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT

Lessons:¹

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the second Chapter of the Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach, or Ecclesiasticus.²

“My son, if thou come to serve the Lord, prepare thy soul for temptation. Set thy heart aright, and constantly endure, and make not haste in time of trouble. Cleave unto him, and depart not away, that thou mayest be increased at thy last end. Whatsoever is brought upon thee take cheerfully, and be patient when thou art changed to a low estate. For gold is tried in the fire, and acceptable men in the furnace of adversity. Believe in him, and he will help thee; order thy way aright, and trust in him. Ye that fear the Lord, wait for his mercy; and go not aside, lest ye fall. Ye that fear the Lord, believe him; and your reward shall not fail. Ye that fear the Lord, hope for good, and for everlasting joy and mercy. Look at the generations of old, and see; did ever any trust in the Lord, and was confounded? or did any abide in his fear, and was forsaken? or whom did he ever despise, that called upon him? For the Lord is full of compassion and mercy, long-suffering, and very pitiful, and forgiveth sins, and saveth in time of affliction. Woe be to fearful hearts, and faint hands, and the sinner that goeth two ways! Woe unto him that is fainthearted! for he believeth not; therefore shall he not be defended. Woe unto you that have lost patience! and what will ye do when the Lord shall visit you? They that fear the Lord will not disobey his word; and they that love him will keep his ways. They that fear the Lord will seek that which is well-pleasing unto him; and they that love him shall be filled with the law. They that fear the Lord will prepare their hearts, and humble their souls in his sight. Saying, we will fall into the hands of the Lord, and not into the hands of men: for as his majesty is, so is his mercy.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the third Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Matthew.³

“In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea, And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. For this is he that was spoken of by the prophet Esaias⁴ [ih-ZAY-uhs],⁵ saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. And the same John had his raiment of camel’s hair, and a leathern girdle about his loins; and his meat was locusts and wild honey. Then went out to him Jerusalem, and all Judaea, and all the region round about Jordan, And were baptized of him in Jordan, confessing their sins.

“But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance: And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham. And now also the axe is laid unto the root of the trees: therefore every tree which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance. but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire: Whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.

“Then cometh Jesus from Galilee to Jordan unto John, to be baptized of him. But John forbad him, saying, I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me? And Jesus answering said unto him, Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness. Then he suffered him. And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending

Certainly Pride, Anger, Envy, and Covetousness offered more than sufficient tools to lead certain leaders of the new movement to split it into ever-smaller factions, factions that would offer far less appeal to the wider world than would larger, more cohesive institutions. And for more than thirty years, the first criticism that has been hurled at the Continuing Churches by those who would belittle them has been “You are just an ‘alphabet soup’ of little groups.”

Of course, it betrays a slightly skewed theology to judge the holiness or faithfulness of a church group by the number of its adherents. We must recall that Christianity was founded to be a counter-cultural force, and that as it grew to encompass the entire Roman Empire, it simultaneously lost a significant part of its spiritual authenticity as it incorporated more and more people who sought political or social acceptance rather than spiritual and moral enlightenment.

Conclusion:

So from this perspective, great size is not always an unmixed blessing. Of course size is important as a very rough measure of how well we are doing in fulfilling Our Lord’s command to go out and teach the Gospel to all nations,⁹ but I rather doubt this is the reason our critics seize so readily on our small numbers as evidence of our presumed insignificance.

Of greater concern to us should be the way the world’s perception of the importance of numbers gives the devil a hook upon which to hang his arguments. So long as we are actually trying to fulfill the Lord’s mission for us, then so long he will try to obstruct us and pull us down. And it is our responsibility to give him as few tools with which to do that as we possibly can.

natures of those temptations become ever more enticing. The devil will tend to neglect the low-hanging fruit in the form of those who are obviously sunk in self-satisfaction in order to tear down those who are making spiritual progress.

Our late, and sainted, Archbishop Michael Dean Stephens used to quote one of his former parishioners, who, when he was enduring extraordinary temptations or even just spiritual “dry spells”, was wont to say, “The devil is camping on my doorstep.”

Much the same is true of organizations and institutions as it is of individuals. Beginning more than thirty years ago, when the Continuing Anglican Churches were formed in opposition to the triumph of modernism and moral revisionism over the old Lambeth Communion, the new movement presented a real threat of renewed attention to spiritual teachings and of revived moral commitment. So it was only to be expected that the devil would have sought to destroy this new movement before it could successfully get itself off the ground.

And the devil found much useful material with which to work. For the original Continuing Churchmen were no less prideful, angry, envious, covetous, gluttonous, lustful, and slothful than were those lax souls in the old churches against whom they were protesting. (And I do hope that, as I spoke those words, you recognized Pride, Anger, Envy, Covetousness, Gluttony, Lust, and Sloth as those Seven Deadly Sins to which the Church has traditionally pointed for its teaching purposes.)

Gluttony, lust, and sloth are more likely to characterize individuals than movements, but all of the Seven Deadly Sins offer the devil opportunities for short-circuiting developments that he finds are contrary to his objectives.

like a dove, and lighting upon him: And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”

Or,

Here beginneth the sixth Chapter of the Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews.⁶

“Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection; not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God, Of the doctrine of baptisms, and of laying on of hands, and of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment. And this will we do, if God permit. For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, And have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, If they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame. For the earth which drinketh in the rain that cometh oft upon it, and bringeth forth herbs meet for them by whom it is dressed, receiveth blessing from God: But that which beareth thorns and briars is rejected, and is nigh unto cursing; whose end is to be burned. But, beloved, we are persuaded better things of you, and things that accompany salvation, though we thus speak. For God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labour of love, which ye have shewed **[SHOWED]** toward his name, in that ye have ministered to the saints, and do minister. And we desire that every one of you do shew **[SHOW]** the same diligence to the full assurance of hope unto the end: That ye be not slothful, but followers of them who through faith and patience inherit the promises. For when God made promise to Abraham, because he could swear by no greater, he sware by himself, Saying, Surely blessing I will bless thee, and multiplying I will multiply thee. And so, after he had patiently endured, he obtained the promise. For men verily swear by the great-

er: and an oath for confirmation is to them an end of all strife. Wherein God, willing more abundantly to shew [SHOW] unto the heirs of promise the immutability of his counsel, confirmed it by an oath: That by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us: Which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and stedfast, and which entereth into that within the veil; Whither the forerunner is for us entered, even Jesus, made an high priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec [mell-KIZZ-uh-deck].”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the First Lesson: ““My son, if thou come to serve the Lord, prepare thy soul for temptation.”⁷ In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Development:

People are usually astonished when we tell them that certain of the Church’s doctrines may be verified empirically; at least, they are astonished until, like G. K. Chesterton, we point out that all around us, original sin may easily be observed in operation. As the ninth Article of Religion puts it, “Original sin ... is the fault and corruption of the Nature of every man ... whereby man is very far gone from original righteousness, and is of his own nature inclined to evil...”⁸

And there is another concept that is closely related to that doctrine of original sin – that is, of our inborn tendency to do those things which we ought not to do and to leave undone those things which we ought to do, so that there is no wholeness in us.

This second doctrine, or perhaps better, this other aspect of that first doctrine, is that we are constantly tempted to do the things we should not and to fail to do the things that we should. For it is this constant state of temptation that renders us constantly liable to falling into sin.

That would be bad enough by itself but it is not just by itself. That is, we would always be in danger of falling away from God, by failing to fulfill His wishes for us, even if all that were operating in our environment was that inborn tendency to do evil. Unfortunately, however, that is not the only force that is in play.

We, like all of humanity before us and like all of humanity that will come after us until Our Lord’s next Coming, have an enemy. That enemy’s goal is to seduce us away from the fellowship with God that is our natural destiny and, as C. S. Lewis’s wonderful *Screwtape Letters* show us, that enemy is most successful in misleading us when he is able to conceal from us both his existence and his influence in our lives.

In at least one way, however, the devil is like every other being. He seeks to maximize his successes by employing the principle of economy of effort, especially by the very rational process of applying himself most vigorously to opposing those people and situations that show the most promise of achieving what he does not want them to achieve.

It is something like a football game. If one team knows that its opponents are unusually strong in their offensive capacities, it will concentrate its efforts on defending against just those strengths, in order to prevent that opposing team from succeeding in scoring. So it is with us. As any individual Christian grows in holiness, he or she will find the devil concentrating more and more effort on undoing that increasing holiness. He or she will find that temptations place themselves in the way with greater frequency and the