

SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYER
The Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity¹

Lessons:²

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the eighteenth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah.³

“The word which came to Jeremiah from the LORD, saying, Arise, and go down to the potter’s house, and there I will cause thee to hear my words. Then I went down to the potter’s house, and, behold, he wrought a work on the wheels. And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter: so he made it again another vessel, as seemed good to the potter to make it. Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying, O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter? saith [SETH] the LORD. Behold, as the clay is in the potter’s hand, so are ye in mine hand, O house of Israel. At what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, and to pull down, and to destroy it; If that nation, against whom I have pronounced, turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them. And at what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it; If it do evil in my sight, that it obey not my voice, then I will repent of the good, wherewith I said I would benefit them.

“Now therefore go to, speak to the men of Judah, and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, saying, Thus saith [SETH] the LORD; Behold, I frame evil against you, and devise a device against you: return ye now every one from his evil way, and make your ways and your doings good. And they said, There is no hope: but we will walk after our own devices, and we will every one do the imagination of his evil heart. Therefore thus saith [SETH] the LORD; Ask ye now among the heathen, who hath heard such things: the virgin of Israel hath done a very horrible thing. Will a man leave the snow of Lebanon which cometh from the rock of the field? or shall the cold flowing waters that come from another place be forsaken? Because my

people hath forgotten me, they have burned incense to vanity, and they have caused them to stumble in their ways from the ancient paths, to walk in paths, in a way not cast up; To make their land desolate, and a perpetual hissing; every one that passeth thereby shall be astonished, and wag his head. I will scatter them as with an east wind before the enemy; I will shew **[SHOW]** them the back, and not the face, in the day of their calamity.”

Or,

Here beginneth the twenty-second Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah.⁴

“Thus saith **[SETH]** the LORD; Go down to the house of the king of Judah, and speak there this word, And say, Hear the word of the LORD, O king of Judah, that sittest upon the throne of David, thou, and thy servants, and thy people that enter in by these gates: Thus saith **[SETH]** the LORD; Execute ye judgment and righteousness, and deliver the spoiled out of the hand of the oppressor: and do no wrong, do no violence to the stranger, the fatherless, nor the widow, neither shed innocent blood in this place. For if ye do this thing indeed, then shall there enter in by the gates of this house kings sitting upon the throne of David, riding in chariots and on horses, he, and his servants, and his people. But if ye will not hear these words, I swear by myself, saith **[SETH]** the LORD, that this house shall become a desolation. For thus saith **[SETH]** the LORD unto the king’s house of Judah; Thou art Gilead unto me, and the head of Lebanon: yet surely I will make thee a wilderness, and cities which are not inhabited. And I will prepare destroyers against thee, every one with his weapons: and they shall cut down thy choice cedars, and cast them into the fire. And many nations shall pass by this city, and they shall say every man to his neighbour, Wherefore hath the LORD done thus unto this great city? Then they shall answer, Because they have forsaken the covenant of the LORD their God, and worshipped other gods, and served them.

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

³ Jeremiah 18:1-17 (KJV).

⁴ Jeremiah 22:1-19 (KJV).

⁵ That is, has its ceiling made of cedar.

⁶ St. John 8:31-end (KJV).

⁷ Hebrews 9:11-15 (KJV).

⁸ Priest, The Anglican Province of Christ the King; Rector, St. Charles King and Martyr Anglican Church, Huntsville, AL.

Law, but the fruit of His resurrection is Grace. Grace means unmerited, or uninherited, favor; the word comes from the Latin *gratia*, which means “gift”.

Through Grace, God calls you beloved, not because of how well you keep the Commandments, but how faithful He is in fulfilling the demands of the Covenant by dying on your behalf and, therefore, fulfilling all the demands of the Law. Because of His faithfulness, He bestows on you the gift of faith, which gives us the desire to please Him. In the long run, we end up fulfilling the Law by His Spirit dwelling within us but its fulfillment is based on His work and not on ours.

Speaking of Grace and faith, whenever in Scripture Jesus exemplifies someone’s faith, we should take notice. Think of the Canaanite woman, or of the Centurion at Cana. The faith expressed by both these non-Jewish strangers was astonishing. The woman said, “Have mercy on me thou Son of David”; the Centurion said, “but only speak the word and my servant shall be healed.” These two were both Gentiles and so were not bound by the Jewish Law yet both had faith even in the absence of that Law. Yet without that Law, Jesus still exclaims to each, “Great is thy faith!”

In the spirit of Passiontide, let us unveil our hearts from the means of the Law, and the works of the flesh, and begin taking comfort in the means by which we receive the promise of eternal heritage. Let us begin seeing Him through eyes of faith, which is given to us by Grace, the fruit of His Resurrection.

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The Rev’d Steven Victory⁸

¹ This sermon was originally written on the Gospel at Mass on Passion Sunday, 2012.

“Weep ye not for the dead, neither bemoan him: but weep sore for him that goeth away: for he shall return no more, nor see his native country. For thus saith [SETH] the LORD touching Shallum [SHALL-umm] the son of Josiah king of Judah, which reigned instead of Josiah his father, which went forth out of this place; He shall not return thither any more: But he shall die in the place whither they have led him captive, and shall see this land no more.

“Woe unto him that buildeth his house by unrighteousness, and his chambers by wrong; that useth his neighbour’s service without wages, and giveth him not for his work; That saith [SETH], I will build me a wide house and large chambers, and cutteth him out windows; and it is cieled⁵ [SEALED] with cedar, and painted with vermilion. Shalt thou reign, because thou closest thyself in cedar? did not thy father eat and drink, and do judgment and justice, and then it was well with him? He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well with him: was not this to know me? saith [SETH] the LORD. But thine eyes and thine heart are not but for thy covetousness, and for to shed innocent blood, and for oppression, and for violence, to do it. Therefore thus saith [SETH] the LORD concerning Jehoiakim [*dgeh-HOY-ah-kim*] the son of Josiah king of Judah; They shall not lament for him, saying, Ah my brother! or, Ah sister! they shall not lament for him, saying, Ah lord! or, Ah his glory! He shall be buried with the burial of an ass, drawn and cast forth beyond the gates of Jerusalem.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the thirty-first Verse of the eighth Chapter of the Gospel According to St. John.⁶

“... Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed on him, If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.

“They answered him, We be Abraham’s seed, and were never in bondage to any man: how sayest thou, Ye shall be made free? Jesus answered them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin. And the servant abideth not in the house for ever: but the Son abideth ever. If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed. I know that ye are Abraham’s seed; but ye seek to kill me, because my word hath no place in you. I speak that which I have seen with my Father: and ye do that which ye have seen with your father. They answered and said unto him, Abraham is our father. Jesus saith [SETH] unto them, If ye were Abraham’s children, ye would do the works of Abraham. But now ye seek to kill me, a man that hath told you the truth, which I have heard of God: this did not Abraham. Ye do the deeds of your father. Then said they to him, We be not born of fornication; we have one Father, even God. Jesus said unto them, If God were your Father, ye would love me: for I proceeded forth and came from God; neither came I of myself, but he sent me. Why do ye not understand my speech? even because ye cannot hear my word. Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it. And because I tell you the truth, ye believe me not. Which of you convinceth me of sin? And if I say the truth, why do ye not believe me? He that is of God heareth God’s words: ye therefore hear them not, because ye are not of God. Then answered the Jews, and said unto him, Say we not well that thou art a Samaritan, and hast a devil? Jesus answered, I have not a devil; but I honour my Father, and ye do dishonour me. And I seek not mine own glory: there is one that seeketh and judgeth. Verily, verily, I say unto you, If a man keep my saying, he shall never see death. Then said the Jews unto him, Now we know that thou hast a devil. Abraham is dead, and the prophets; and thou sayest, If a man keep my saying, he shall never taste of death. Art thou greater than our father Abraham, which is dead? and the prophets are dead: whom makest thou thyself? Jesus answered, If I honour myself, my honour is nothing: it is

greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this building; Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us. For if the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh: How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? And for this cause he is the mediator of the new testament, that by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first testament, they which are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance.”⁷

We do not find our righteousness based on the works of the Law, we find it only through the shed Blood of Jesus Christ. It is solely through grace, by faith, in the eternal redemption given to us by the death and Resurrection of the Son of God. We can work all we want to receive the righteousness of God, but until we obtain the gifts of grace and faith, our works of righteousness are in vain. We are deemed righteous by our works no longer, because we would boast in our own merit. Our own merit, our own righteousness is as filthy rags.

Outside of the Blood of the New and Everlasting Covenant, our works make us very pious dead people. And those who try and justify themselves by the works of the Law will remain self righteous and indignant when hearing the voice of Truth, because they still hide behind the veil of the flesh. Jesus came and destroyed the works of the flesh, which is bound by the Law. So we have the freedom now to see clearly the reality of just what He came and accomplished.

But we also tend to fall into the trap of serving Him out of obligation, only out of religious traditions, rather than out of love. We have replaced the obsolete Law with a new law made by man. But no matter which law it is, where Law is supreme, faith is not. The fruit of the death of Christ is freedom from the

And their demands that the Law be fulfilled fell into an eerie silence. Why? Because the veil of their heart was split in two, and the realization of Christ's message to those bound by the law became strangely apparent: "No one is righteous, no not one." And the scribes and Pharisees slowly dropped their stones and began to disperse.

Throughout this same Chapter, the principal subject is the Law. Truly, that Law gave men a sense of indignation, but without justification. Their consciences could be soothed by fulfilling the letter of the Law, while not being redeemed by the spirit of that Law. This kept them hidden behind the veil of the flesh.

So Jesus exposes to all who listen just Who He is. Being bound by the Law, or shall we say by the letter of the Law, his hearers could not see that Jesus was truly sent by God, and yet was God Himself. In their state of bondage, they heard the voice of Truth, and yet they called Him a Samaritan, that is, a heretic. On top of that, they called Him crazy by saying that He had a devil, that is, was possessed. In contrast to their pride in fulfilling the Law, Jesus specifically points out that He could not Honor Himself, but only Honor God.

Thus he showed those who stood by that if they honored themselves, their honor was nothing. By fulfilling the letter of the law, these men were truly more interested in honoring themselves, instead of honoring the Lord of the Law, and that self-preoccupation gave them this sense of righteous indignation which blinded them from seeing the reality of God in their midst. Fulfilling the Law let one deem himself as being righteous, but by works only, because the Law could not penetrate his heart.

Just like the veil on the cross obstructs our view of the beautiful majesty underneath, so the Law and the flesh obstruct our faith in Christ's obtaining eternal redemption for us: "But Christ being come an high priest of good things to come, by a

my Father that honoureth me; of whom ye say, that he is your God: Yet ye have not known him; but I know him: and if I should say, I know him not, I shall be a liar like unto you: but I know him, and keep his saying. Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad. Then said the Jews unto him, Thou art not yet fifty years old, and hast thou seen Abraham? Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, I am. Then took they up stones to cast at him: but Jesus hid himself, and went out of the temple, going through the midst of them, and so passed by."

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Homily:

Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.

This evening's Second Lesson includes the passage that is assigned as the Gospel for Mass on the Fifth Sunday in Lent, which we also call Passion Sunday. Were we in church that morning, we would find ourselves beginning the last two weeks in Lent, approaching our celebration of the Paschal feast at Easter. And what would we notice differently as we looked all around us that morning? We would notice that the crosses in the church were all veiled. This veiling symbolizes the two weeks preceding our Paschal celebration, weeks which we call Passiontide.

At that time, we would be preparing to celebrate Christ's glorious Resurrection, but before His Resurrection had to come His death. The veiled crosses remind us of this: the veils are opaque, they do not completely prevent our seeing what is underneath but they do not allow us to see it easily. They somewhat hides what is underneath, while still allowing all to see, but making it difficult to make out in its fullness what really lies beneath.

And we seem to be comfortable with that. The Crucifixion of Christ on the Cross is veiled in mystery, and after Passion Sunday we won't see it in its glorious fullness again until Good Friday, when it is unveiled for the ceremony of the Adoration of the Cross. Because we see through a glass darkly, even after the Cross is unveiled on Good Friday, it will remain veiled in our minds and in our hearts.

Why? Because we don't know the full and real meaning of Christ's Crucifixion! For us, a veiled cross hides the significance of what Christ truly accomplished through His Passion, and it is futile for us to try fully to understand the Passion of Christ. And in failing to understanding the reality of the Cross, we also miss the reality of the Resurrection.

Looking at those Passiontide veiled crosses reminds us of other scenes from Scripture. Take Noah's Ark, for example. Upon the majority of churches' nursery walls, you will find a colorful depiction of the animals filing into the ark, two by two. And when we gaze on to that scene we think how nice, how pretty. And we walk away with warm fuzzies, thinking that image is a true depiction of some Bible story, that somehow our kids are being taught the Biblical truths behind that scene, by a colorful, playful description.

And yet we miss the terrible cost to build that ark and the destruction of humanity from which that ark saved Noah and his family. You won't see on church and home nursery walls the true picture, as given in Scripture, because most children would get nightmares from seeing dead bodies and the rest of destroyed creation floating amidst the great and terrible flood waters. Like graphic news reports after Hurricane Katrina, it would be so gruesome that most adults could not stomach looking upon it.

Too often, we read Scripture with a false sense of security, as though these events were just stories out of some old

book, and the truth of the details is lost to us. So an opaque, veiled cross shows, in some quiet fashion, the true state of every heart that gazes upon it. This is the veil that our Scripture lessons try to pull away, so that everyone who does look upon that Cross with its Corpus hanging there, can fully understand what was there accomplished, and Who it is exactly that accomplished this, as He obtained for us eternal redemption.

Unlike the Synoptic Gospels, that is, unlike Matthew, Mark, and Luke, which tell more of *what* Jesus did, the Gospel of John and the writings of St. Paul give us an understanding more of *Who* Jesus was, and because of Who He was, what it was that He came to accomplish. Thus the eagle is a symbol of St. John, because his Gospel takes us soaring into the clouds of the Divinity of Jesus.

For example, let us look at what John's Gospel reports about the Eucharist. You will find the institution of the Eucharist in the Synoptic Gospels, but within the Gospel of John you will not find that sacred act recorded. Instead, you will find St. John soaring into the real meaning behind the sacred act, in the Bread of Life discourse in John 6: "I am the Bread come down from Heaven, and unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man, and drink His Blood, you have no life in you."

Our Second Lesson today, taken from St. John's Chapter 8, writes of Jesus' discourse with the Jews. In context, this happens just after the Scribes and Pharisees brought before Him a woman caught in the act of adultery. Immediately, her captors began spouting off just what punishment the Law of Moses commanded in these circumstances.

Why? It was the works of the Law by which one could be deemed righteous or unrighteous, and these men were greatly puffed up and prideful about their own fulfilling that Law. Yet Jesus, in His infinite wisdom, shocked and humiliated them. He said, "He who is without sin, let him cast the first stone."