

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER
The First Sunday after the Epiphany¹

Lessons:

The First Lesson:² Here beginneth the twenty-second Verse of the eighth Chapter of the Proverbs.³

“... The LORD possessed me in the beginning of his way, before his works of old. I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was. When there were no depths, I was brought forth; when there were no fountains abounding with water. Before the mountains were settled, before the hills was I brought forth: While as yet he had not made the earth, nor the fields, nor the highest part of the dust of the world. When he prepared the heavens, I was there: when he set a compass upon the face of the depth: When he established the clouds above: when he strengthened the fountains of the deep: When he gave to the sea his decree, that the waters should not pass his commandment: when he appointed the foundations of the earth: Then I was by him, as one brought up with him: and I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him; Rejoicing in the habitable part of his earth; and my delights were with the sons of men. Now therefore hearken unto me, O ye children: for blessed are they that keep my ways. Hear instruction, and be wise, and refuse it not. Blessed is the man that heareth me, watching daily at my gates, waiting at the posts of my doors. For whoso findeth me findeth life, and shall obtain favour of the LORD.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson:⁴ Here beginneth the forty-first Verse of the second Chapter of the Gospel according to St. Luke.

“... Now his parents went to Jerusalem every year at the feast of the passover. And when he was twelve years old, they

went up to Jerusalem after the custom of the feast. And when they had fulfilled the days, as they returned, the child Jesus tarried behind in Jerusalem; and Joseph and his mother knew not of it. But they, supposing him to have been in the company, went a day's journey; and they sought him among their kinsfolk and acquaintance. And when they found him not, they turned back again to Jerusalem, seeking him. And it came to pass, that after three days they found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the doctors, both hearing them, and asking them questions. And all that heard him were astonished at his understanding and answers. And when they saw him, they were amazed: and his mother said unto him, Son, why hast thou thus dealt with us? behold, thy father and I have sought thee sorrowing. And he said unto them, How is it that ye sought me? wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business? And they understood not the saying which he spake unto them. And he went down with them, and came to Nazareth, and was subject unto them: but his mother kept all these sayings in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man."

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Homily:

Years ago there was a 15 year old young man who was studying for confirmation. He asked an amazing question. "What," he said, "is the difference between morals and ethics?" That's a heavy-duty question to ask at any age.

Ethics is man's study about what is good and right and true. Morality is God's revelation to man about what is good and right and true. Ethics come from man and morality comes from God. God reveals the moral law to Moses on Mt. Sinai. The Law comes from the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Ghost. The moral Law is the straightedge against which everything must be measured.

about how the Father does things. Love is self-givingness, self-donating, pouring out, emptying out. The ultimate wisdom is the folly of the Cross. The man hanging on the Cross is the King of Glory.

Epiphany is the manifestation of the glory of Christ. Today we focus on His wisdom as a boy in the Temple. We rejoice in His wisdom, as Truth personified. We will receive Him this morning as our Food. O come, let us adore Him.

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January 8, 2012

¹ This sermon was originally written on the Gospel for Holy Communion on the First Sunday after the Epiphany, 2012.

² *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year (1943)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

³ Proverbs 8:22-35 (KJV).

⁴ "Upon any Sunday or Holy Day, the Minister may read the Epistle or the Gospel of the Day in place of the Second Lesson at Morning or Evening Prayer." *Concerning the Service of the Church*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER viii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

⁵ Bishop Ordinary, the Diocese of the Holy Cross; Rector, the Cathedral Church of the Epiphany, Columbia, SC.

truth is one today's terrible idols. Society can make the rules up as it goes along. God gets eased out of the picture.

Here's how this played itself out in the latter 19th and early 20th centuries. In the later 19th century there was a revolution in physics. We got the electric light, the car and the airplane. But as we eased Jesus, Truth incarnate, out of the picture, we got World War I. Then in the 20th century came a great revolution in chemistry. This gave us nylon, plastic and the computer chip. But as we eased Jesus, Truth incarnate, out of the picture, we got World War II.

Today we are living through a great revolution in biology. This gives us genetics, prevention of many disabilities, wonder drugs and better crops. But as we ease out Jesus, Truth incarnate, out of the picture, and play God, we get the culture of death and the abolition of man. Physics, chemistry and biology are important disciplines, which give us important tools for our lives, but they cannot save us. Without God they lead to tyranny and death.

Truth for the tyrant always gets reduced down to whatever he dictates. The White Witch of Narnia, in C. S. Lewis's *Narnia Chronicles*, rules by power alone. For her, power, not love, is the ultimate moral absolute. And so in Narnia, under her rule, it is always winter, and never Christmas. The one in power determines who lives and who dies. The White Witch demands Edmond's blood, and as soon as she can arrange it, she will have the blood of his brother and his sisters. The pagan and barbarian gods and goddesses always demand our blood, in stark contrast to our heavenly Father, Whose Son sheds all His blood for us and becomes our meat and drink.

All this is prefigured and prophesied in the Old Testament. Jesus and the Doctors of the Law were no doubt touching upon these subjects. The teachers of the Law were amazed by Jesus, Who later on would proclaim Himself to be the Truth incarnate. He will shed His Blood for us because that is the truth

Now in today's Second Lesson, the Son of God goes to Jerusalem with Mary and Joseph. He is in the Temple, discussing the Law, the moral Law, the Torah, with the Doctors—that is, teachers—of the Law. Jesus is in the Temple because Jews who can journey to Jerusalem for three major feasts: Tabernacles, Passover and Pentecost. As they near the City, ascending upwards, they sing the Songs of Ascents, Psalms 120-134: "I was glad when they said unto me, we will go unto the House of the Lord." Jesus is about twelve years old, on the threshold of manhood, ready for Bar Mitzvah, to be made a son of the Law. He appears in Luke's Gospel as a boy only this once. We know all this because Mary must have told it to Luke.

Jesus lingers in the Temple. He has to be there. Luke has in the back of his mind the young Samuel in the old sanctuary at Shiloh, serving God as a boy under Eli the priest. Now Jesus is with the Doctors of the Law. An academy was there in Jerusalem, probably including Gamaliel [*guh-MAY-lee-ell*]. The Doctors of the Law were very important. Imagine a twelve-year-old boy holding his own today in the Board Room of General Motors. It is astonishing that Jesus is speaking with the Doctors of the Law. In those days a boy would not speak until spoken to.

The Doctors of the Law are amazed by Jesus' knowledge of the Scriptures and His wisdom. The Doctors are sensing that Jesus doesn't just know about the blessed One, He *knows* Him, directly and personally. Perhaps they have a mysterious sense that He *is* the Word which they have studied all their lives. They are awestruck. The Wisdom of the Father is being manifested in Jesus. Jesus is recapitulating, summing up, re-capping, in His Person, the whole wisdom tradition of Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and numerous psalms and books in the Apocrypha.

One of the great strands of the Wisdom tradition is that truth and love cannot be separated. Truth and love go together. There cannot be one without the other. In our Prayer Book, on

page 74, in the Prayer for the Whole State of Christ's Church, we recognize this. We beseech God "to inspire continually the Universal Church with the spirit of truth, unity and concord." The order is deliberate. Concord depends on unity, and unity depends on truth.

This is true of marriage, and in all our relationships. Love depends on facing the truth of a situation, not on fantasies or illusions or what we wish were true. We are a reality oriented people. In the case of the Holy Family, Mary and Joseph put the truth of the situation first when they realized that Jesus was not with them as they returned home to Nazareth. They do not know that He is lingering in the Temple. They fear that He is lost. He could be kidnapped. Nothing can be worse than losing Jesus. He is Truth incarnate. They put Him first. He is their top priority. They have to find Him. All Joseph's instincts as Jesus' foster father come into play. Later, Mary's wisdom comes into the picture, because she will take everything Jesus says and keep it in her heart. She is the wisdom that was personified as a woman in the Book of Proverbs.

They find Jesus because they put Him first. And in the Finding, how relieved they are, how full their joy. It sometimes seems that the Father's way forward hangs by a thread, the thread of the Finding. How many vital issues hang by a thread, the fate of the West, hanging by the thread of the Battle of Britain in September, 1940. We think of recoveries from illness or financial setbacks. We have phrases like "I just squeaked by," or "We made it by the skin of our teeth." We think of Apollo 13 or the patriot's victory at Yorktown in 1783.

With Jesus' death on the Cross, the Father's way forward seems to hang by a thread, because Jesus Body, the ultimate Temple of the Holy Spirit, is torn apart in the most ferocious way imaginable. The Father is teaching us complete dependence on Him: to be dependent on Him, the way the Son is, in the Holy Spirit. Turn to Him in every issue, in every decision, in every frustrating or exasperating moment, in every per-

plexity, in every doubt, in every fear, in every insecurity, in every guilt.

We do this through a simple prayer: "Lord, I turn this over to you, this perplexity, this hurt, this anger, this loss, this doubt. I turn it over to you, and place it at the foot of your Cross, so that it is under the Blood. The Blood drips down on what you put there, the Blood that makes everything new, the Blood that raises to glory everything put under it.

In every facet of marriage and family life today, look to the Holy Family. Put truth first, put Jesus first, not feelings, not quest for happiness, not self-fulfillment. The first word in marriage is faithfulness, not love. Faithfulness is the framework for love, faithfulness first to God, then to one another. The song, "I was looking for love in all the wrong places" tells how love was wrong because there was no faithfulness.

In family life, God comes first, then spouse, then children. From the heavenly Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit, to the earthly father, then the wife, then the children. This is the heavenly hierarchy in which love makes all the lovers equal. That's how the Holy Family lived. We can learn to be faithful to each other because our heavenly Father is completely faithful to us. He is true to us.

In the framework of fidelity we are free to love, which means have the best interests of the other person at heart. Loving does not necessarily mean liking. We are commanded to love everyone, but not necessarily to like everyone. Loving is bigger than liking. It is much bigger than our feelings. It is much bigger than happiness. It is much more than therapy.

Today truth is trivialized as never before. It is claimed that there is no objective truth. There is only "my" truth and "your" truth. This is the trivialization and privatization of truth. Truth is made subjective. I make up my own truth. Subjective