

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER
Ember Friday in Autumn¹

The Lessons:²

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the second Chapter of the Second Book of the Kings, commonly called the Fourth Book of the Kings.³

“And it came to pass, when the Lord would take up Elijah into heaven by a whirlwind, that Elijah went with Elisha from Gilgal. And Elijah said unto Elisha, Tarry here, I pray thee; for the Lord hath sent me to Bethel [**BETH-ull**]. And Elisha said unto him, As the Lord liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee. So they went down to Bethel [**BETH-ull**]. And the sons of the prophets that were at Bethel [**BETH-ull**] came forth to Elisha, and said unto him, Knowest thou that the Lord will take away thy master from thy head to day? And he said, Yea, I know it; hold ye your peace. And Elijah said unto him, Elisha, tarry here, I pray thee; for the Lord hath sent me to Jericho. And he said, As the Lord liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee. So they came to Jericho. And the sons of the prophets that were at Jericho came to Elisha, and said unto him, Knowest thou that the Lord will take away thy master from thy head to day? And he answered, Yea, I know it; hold ye your peace. And Elijah said unto him, Tarry, I pray thee, here; for the Lord hath sent me to Jordan. And he said, As the Lord liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee. And they two went on. And fifty men of the sons of the prophets went, and stood to view afar off: and they two stood by Jordan. And Elijah took his mantle, and wrapped it together, and smote the waters, and they were divided hither and thither, so that they two went over on dry ground.

“And it came to pass, when they were gone over, that Elijah said unto Elisha, Ask what I shall do for thee, before I be taken away from thee. And Elisha said, I pray thee, let a double portion⁴ of thy spirit be upon me. And he said, Thou hast asked a hard thing: nevertheless, if thou see me when I

am taken from thee, it shall be so unto thee; but if not, it shall not be so. And it came to pass, as they still went on, and talked, that, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven.

“And Elisha saw it, and he cried, My father, my father, the chariot of Israel, and the horsemen thereof. And he saw him no more: and he took hold of his own clothes, and rent them in two pieces. He took up also the mantle of Elijah that fell from him, and went back, and stood by the bank of Jordan; And he took the mantle of Elijah that fell from him, and smote the waters, and said, Where is the Lord God of Elijah? and when he also had smitten the waters, they parted hither and thither: and Elisha went over. And when the sons of the prophets which were to view at Jericho saw him, they said, The spirit of Elijah doth rest on Elisha. And they came to meet him, and bowed themselves to the ground before him.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the seventh Verse of the ninth Chapter of the First Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians.⁵

“... Who goeth a warfare any time at his own charges? who planteth a vineyard, and eateth not of the fruit thereof? or who feedeth a flock, and eateth not of the milk of the flock? Say I these things as a man? or saith [SETH] not the law the same also? For it is written in the law of Moses, thou shalt not muzzle the mouth of the ox that treadeth out the corn. Doth God take care for oxen? Or saith [SETH] he it altogether for our sakes? For our sakes, no doubt, this is written: that he that ploweth should plow in hope; and that he that thresheth in hope should be partaker of his hope. If we have sown unto you spiritual things, is it a great thing if we shall reap your carnal things? If others be partakers of this power over you, are not we rather? Nevertheless we

have not used this power; but suffer all things, lest we should hinder the gospel of Christ. Do ye not know that they which minister about holy things live of the things of the temple? and they which wait at the altar are partakers with the altar? Even so hath the Lord ordained that they which preach the gospel should live of the gospel. But I have used none of these things: neither have I written these things, that it should be so done unto me: for it were better for me to die, than that any man should make my glorying void. For though I preach the gospel, I have nothing to glory of: for necessity is laid upon me; yea, woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel! For if I do this thing willingly, I have a reward: but if against my will, a dispensation of the gospel is committed unto me. What is my reward then? Verily that, when I preach the gospel, I may make the gospel of Christ without charge, that I abuse not my power in the gospel. For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more. And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; To them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law. To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. And this I do for the gospel's sake, that I might be partaker thereof with you. Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain. And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible. I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air: But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway."

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable.”⁶ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Introduction:

Today’s Second Lesson contains one of the bits of Scripture that most Christians instantly recognize, at least for its familiar metaphor of a foot race if not for the context in which St. Paul used that metaphor. “Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize?”⁷ Immediately, that line calls to mind the image of the well-toned athletes with whom we are familiar from Greek sculpture, completely focused on the prospect of winning the acclaim and respect that would be symbolized by a wreath of fresh—and therefore, as Paul notes, perishable—greenery.

Theme:

We could probably weave an entire sermon around that fact of the Greeks and Romans’ competing for a simple ornament of leaves that, being made of laurel branches, would last for less time than do our Christmas wreaths made of evergreens. For in Classical times there were no Olympic medals as we know them, that can be displayed for the winners’ lifetimes and after, nor were there any television commercials in which they could appear nor product endorsements to make them wealthy. There were only the memories of their moments of triumph, memories that might be, in the case only of the greatest, preserved through those statues we now see in our museums.

But Paul is not really talking about athletic contests as such; he uses this metaphor only in four verses of a much

prophetic ministry, which is symbolized by Elijah’s mantel or cloak which fell to Elisha.

⁵ I Corinthians 9:7-end (KJV).

⁶ I Corinthians 9:25 (RSV).

⁷ I Corinthians 9:24 (RSV).

⁸ I Corinthians 9:25 (RSV).

⁹ Priest Associate, Christ Anglican Catholic Church, Metairie, LA; Priest-in-Charge, Holy Angels Anglican Catholic Mission, Picayune, MS; Honorary Canon, the Diocese of the Resurrection, and Honorary Canon and Canon to the Ordinary, the Diocese of New Orleans, The Anglican Catholic Church.

If we ever doubt that people judge the sincerity and validity of our Christian Faith by the visible effect it has on the ways we live, we need only recall the public's reaction, and our own reactions, to the revelations that accompanied so many of the scandals involving famous televangelists.

What was it that discouraged so many of their adherents and, all too often, drove those disheartened souls away from all participation in the church? Simply put, it was the stark hypocrisy of those who claimed publicly to be Christians yet who privately acted as pagans.

So if we wish to win souls for Christ, we must accept the same burden as did St. Paul. We must give up some of our freedom of choice or, more accurately, we must exercise that freedom so as to choose to behave as Christians are expected to behave, so that those who are evaluating Christianity will see its effects in us.

And now, unto God the ✠ Father, God the ✠ Son, and God the ✠ Holy Ghost, be ascribed, as is most justly due, all might, majesty, dominion, glory, and power, both now and evermore. Amen.

—oo0oo—

The Rev'd Canon John A. Hollister⁹
February 5, 2012

¹ This sermon was originally written on the Epistle for Mass on Septuagesima Sunday, 2012.

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

³ II Kings 2:1-15 (KJV).

⁴ That is, the traditional portion of the "first-born son" or principal heir, which was twice the portion given to each of the other heirs. This means that Elisha was asking to be Elijah's spiritual heir, inheriting the latter's

longer discourse and as an illustration to round out an argument he has already made at length. And that longer discussion focuses on the self-discipline that is required to live the human life, so the only part of the athlete's training that is germane to his point is the athlete's need to avoid destructive indulgences. As Paul says, "Every athlete exercises self-control in all things."⁸

Development:

If we look back to the beginning of the eighth Chapter of First Corinthians, we see that Chapter is devoted to the question of how Christians, after their conversions, are to accommodate themselves to the twin necessities of living in a largely pagan society and of successfully evangelizing those pagan neighbors. Paul raises this issue in the context of the practice, common in Corinth and elsewhere, by which the pagan temples burned only token portions of their sacrificial animals and sold the remainder in the public markets. In other words, the temples frequently served as butcher shops, which raised the question whether Christians could permissibly eat and consume meat that had, at least in theory, been dedicated as offerings to pagan idols.

Lest this seem to us too minute and scrupulous a point of conscience, let us remember that pagan sacrifices usually involved the worshippers' consuming a portion of the animal that was sacrificed, as a symbolic sharing of a meal not only with each other but with their god, who was believed to be dining off the part that was burnt and ascending to heaven as smoke.

Furthermore, those worshippers did not always eat their portion at the temple but sometimes took it home and consumed it there. And we can safely assume that part of the temples' marketing program was the suggestion, perhaps subtle but more likely overt, that by purchasing and consuming the temples' meat citizens were sharing in the meals of

the gods even when they themselves had not made those offerings nor participated in the prayers and rites of offering.

Just imagine how a contemporary church congregation could improve its fundraising if it could convince the public that those who bought and ate its takeout meals would not only get good food but would also receive all the spiritual benefits of actually attending its full worship services. Our late Archbishop John Cahoon used to say that in the breast of every Christian beats a heart that is just looking for an excuse not to come to church.

And what a marvelous excuse this would be to feel good about never coming to church! Just buy a tasty meal, contribute thereby to the church's funds, and fulfill one's obligation of public worship, all without getting any closer to the church than its parking lot and without even getting out of one's car! And do you really suppose the ancient Corinthians were any different in this respect than are the people around us?

In other words, the pagan worship involved what Christians could easily recognize as an act of communion, and there was potentially a rather fine line between such home consumption that was an extension of the offering at the temple and the type of home consumption practiced by Christians, who ignored the temple's connection to their meat and were simply buying convenient household supplies.

As Paul acknowledges in Chapter Eight, Christians who are firm in their faith have no difficulty sorting out what they are doing in that situation and so buying and eating the temples' meat presents no threat to their faith. However, it is not they about whom he is concerned. Rather, that entire Chapter is devoted to the problems of those who are only recently converted, and who do not yet understand all the implications of their new Faith, and those who are not yet

converted, and who understand almost nothing about the Faith. For these latter people are not equipped to distinguish between the Christian consumption of meat that was readily available in the marketplace and the pagan communion through the consumption of consecrated offerings

So the real issue is not Christians' freedom from pagan superstitions but, instead, the example Christians give by their manner of living to their brethren, both those who are not yet as firm in the faith as they themselves are and to those who are not yet Christians but may be persuaded to become so.

Having thus set up the issue in Chapter Eight by discussing how the Christian household "makes groceries" in a pagan world, Paul devotes Chapter Nine to a discussion of how we must sometimes make personal sacrifices in order to improve the chances that our evangelistic messages will be received by our hearers. And for most of Chapter Nine, the example Paul uses is himself. He tells us how he has voluntarily given up things to which he is unquestionably entitled, such as being supported materially by his missionary efforts, and has lived only on the proceeds of his manual work, in order to increase his appearance of sincerity and, therefore, the credibility of his message.

And this is the context in which, as a final flourish, Paul concludes this portion of his argument with his famous metaphor of the racer. Just as an athlete in training must be prepared to give up certain legitimate self-indulgences in order to become stronger and so better able to win the prize, Christians must be prepared to give up certain lawful self-indulgences in order better to win men's souls.

Conclusion:

For Paul is always aware of, and always preaches the need of, the evangelistic power of our own manner of living.