

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER
The Feast of Saints Simon and Jude
(October 28)

Lessons:¹

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the ninth Verse of the twenty-eighth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.²

“... Whom shall he teach knowledge? and whom shall he make to understand doctrine? them that are weaned from the milk, and drawn from the breasts. For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little: For with stammering lips and another tongue will he speak to this people. To whom he said, This is the rest wherewith ye may cause the weary to rest; and this is the refreshing: yet they would not hear. But the word of the Lord was unto them precept upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little; that they might go, and fall backward, and be broken, and snared, and taken. Wherefore hear the word of the Lord, ye scornful men, that rule this people which is in Jerusalem. Because ye have said, We have made a covenant with death, and with hell are we at agreement; when the overflowing scourge shall pass through, it shall not come unto us: for we have made lies our refuge, and under falsehood have we hid ourselves: Therefore thus saith the Lord God, Behold, I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner stone, a sure foundation: he that believeth shall not make haste.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

Second Lesson: Here beginneth the eleventh Verse of the second Chapter of the Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Ephesians.³

“Wherefore remember, that ye being in time past Gentiles in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision by that which

is called the Circumcision in the flesh made by hands; That at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world: But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us; Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace; And that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby: And came and preached peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were nigh. For through him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the First Lesson:

“Whom will he teach knowledge, and to whom will he explain the message?
Those who are weaned from the milk,
those taken from the breast?”⁴

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Sermon:

Today’s First Lesson is drawn from what is actually an oracle that sets forth God’s intended, and adverse, dealings with Samaria and Judah as a consequence of those territories’ falling away from the Jews’ Covenant with Him.⁵ In fact, this is a prediction of the Assyrians’ and the Babylonians’ later capture of Israel and Judah and their deporting the populations there to exile in Mesopotamia.

¹ *Psalms and Lessons for the Fixed Holy Days* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xlv (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943), commonly called “the 1943 Lectionary”.

² Isaiah 28:9-16 (KJV).

³ Ephesians 2:11-18 (KJV).

⁴ Isaiah 28:9 (RSV).

⁵ HERBERT G. MAY & BRUCE M. METZGER, eds., THE NEW OXFORD ANNOTATED BIBLE WITH THE APOCRYPHA, REVISED STANDARD VERSION 854 (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1977).

⁶ *Derek Kidner, Isaiah*, in D. GUTHRIE AND J. A. MOTYER, eds., THE NEW BIBLE COMMENTARY REVISED, 3rd Ed. 606 (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970).

⁷ Proverbs 16:18 (RSV).

⁸ Honorary Canon, The Diocese of the Resurrection, and Honorary Canon and Canon to the Ordinary, The Diocese of New Orleans, The Anglican Catholic Church; Supply Priest, Christ Church Anglican Catholic Pro-Cathedral Church, Metairie, LA, and Priest-in-Charge, Holy Angels Anglican Catholic Mission, Picayune, MS.

The reason I suggest that Covetousness can sometimes be assigned to the “Cold-Blooded” category and sometimes to the “Warm-Blooded” one is that sometimes our greed—which is just another name for Covetousness—is, like Lust, Gluttony, and Sloth, just the excessive flowering of our natural instincts of acquisitiveness. When that is the case, then Covetousness would seem to belong among the “Warm-Blooded Sins” and it need not erect any insurmountable barrier to the sinner’s accurate self-assessment.

But Covetousness can also arise from something closely akin to Pride, as when we see someone else possessing something we would like to have and we feel we are so much more deserving of that good thing that we can disregard the entitlements of its lawful owner. That is what King David did so notoriously in the case of Bathsheeba and Uriah the Hittite and it is, quite clearly, the fundamental motive for thefts and frauds of all forms.

In these cases, Covetousness belongs firmly among “The Cold-Blooded Sins”, the ones that veil from us the true nature of our own conduct.

So this, fundamentally, is what, in today’s First Lesson, Isaiah accuses the Israelites: of that “Cold-Blooded Sin” of Pride, to which they have succumbed to the point that they have come to believe that they are in a better position to assess the nature and consequences of their conduct than is their God.

That is always the recipe for disaster. And that, in turn, is why those same Israelites had a proverb that says, “Pride goes before destruction, / and a haughty spirit before a fall.”⁷

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In this context, Isaiah’s question to his hearers, asking whether God will teach knowledge to those who have been weaned from their mothers, that is, to those who have begun the process of growing to independence, is a derisive rhetorical statement, somewhat similar to our contemporary colloquial phrase, “Do you think that, just because I was born at night, that I was born last night?”

Here, the suggestion is something along the lines of, “If you think the prophets who have been warning you are little children (that is, have just been weaned), so that you do not need to heed their warning that God’s Law is indeed the Law, then you will have to learn this lesson over again from the Assyrians.”⁶

The tendency to discount sound advice, on the ground that the hearer must necessarily know the facts better than does the speaker, is, of course, not a problem that was unique to the ancient Hebrews. Every parent is familiar with it, and with how it is particularly prevalent with children between the ages of, say, nine and nineteen.

My father used to quote with relish a comment attributed to Samuel Langhorne Clemens, who is supposed to have said, “When I was sixteen, I was appalled at how ignorant my father was, but when I was twenty-one, I was amazed at how much the old man had learned in five years.” And then there is that poster one sees from time to time, the one that says, “Hire a teenager now, while he still knows everything.”

This, then, is the gravamen of Isaiah’s charge against the people of Israel: that, all too often, they knew better than God does. Just think about that for a moment: we regularly refer to God as “omniscient”, meaning “all-knowing”. So if we could know something better than God does, we would have attained the unimaginable status of being “more than all”. I suppose that must be a bit like the quality we sometimes see being in touted

in advertisements, where the object on sale is described as being “more unique” than something else. And all this time we thought “unique” meant that there could be nothing else similar....

But enough of such digressions; back to the concept of our knowing better than God does what we need, or what we should be doing, or what we should not be doing. One could summarize the entire Old Testament as the history of the ancient Hebrews’ continuous re-adoption of this attitude. Right from the account in Genesis of the very first human beings, all the way down through the destruction and exile of the two Jewish kingdoms of Israel and Judah, the sad story of humanity was one of our species’ regularly returning to the belief that we know everything that is important for us so that we need not heed God’s directives about what is important for us.

As a direct result, that same story was one of the largest part of the population’s getting itself into serious difficulties, often suffering disasters and occasionally incurring utter destruction, while frequently only a tiny remnant remained faithful to God’s requirements. You will recall that by the time of Elijah, during the national apostasy fostered by King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, the entire people of Israel had abandoned the Covenant with God, save only five thousand faithful Jews who remained true to their obligations.

But this type of self-exaltation, of prizing our own whims over God’s commandments, is not limited to nations or whole societies. It is a powerful force in the lives of individuals, too; in fact, it could be viewed as one of the essential well-springs of sin. It is precisely when we place the most value on our own knowledge or judgment, to the exclusion of input from others, that we are most in danger of committing major errors. In short, this attitude is simply one specialized manifestation of that uniquely human failing that we call Pride.

In this regard, you will remember the Church’s traditional teaching device that we call “The Seven Deadly Sins”. These are Pride, Anger, Envy, Covetousness, Gluttony, Lust, and Sloth. I will always remember something told me by an older friend, who himself had heard it many years before from an old Episcopal priest. That priest had divided these Seven Deadly Sins into two categories, one composed of Pride, Anger, and Envy, that he called “The Cold-Blooded Sins”, and the other composed of Gluttony, Lust, and Sloth, that he called “The Warm-Blooded Sins”.

As you will see in a moment, the seventh Sin, Covetousness, could be placed in either one of these categories, depending upon the emotions or motives that give rise to it in any particular situation.

This unnamed priest’s idea was that “The Warm-Blooded Sins”, while dangerous to our spiritual health, all arise from natural human instincts and tendencies that are related to our physical survival. What makes them sinful is thus not qualitative but quantitative: that sometimes we over-indulge in them, or are moved to indulge in them under the wrong circumstances. And what is particularly characteristic of this group is that, even when we are mired in these particular sins, we may still be quite conscious of the sinful nature of our behavior, so it is still possible for us to come to repent of this behavior and so to commit ourselves to amending it.

“The Cold-Blooded Sins”, on the other hand, do not arise out of any necessities of survival. Also, it is precisely because they involve our developing an inflated sense of our own importance that they have the particularly insidious quality of concealing from us any consciousness of the sinful nature of our attitudes and behavior. Thus those who are beset by this “Cold-Blooded” category of mortal sin are in even greater danger than are those who are afflicted by the “Warm-Blooded” one, because they are much less likely ever to perceive their need for repentance and contrition.