

SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYER¹
The Second Sunday after Trinity²

Lessons:³

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the eighth Verse of the fourth Chapter of the Second Book of the Kings, commonly called the Fourth Book of the Kings.⁴

“And it fell on a day, that Elisha passed to Shunem [**SHOE-nemm**], where was a great woman; and she constrained him to eat bread. And so it was, that as oft as he passed by, he turned in thither to eat bread. And she said unto her husband, Behold now, I perceive that this is an holy man of God, which passeth by us continually. Let us make a little chamber, I pray thee, on the wall; and let us set for him there a bed, and a table, and a stool, and a candlestick: and it shall be, when he cometh to us, that he shall turn in thither. And it fell on a day, that he came thither, and he turned into the chamber, and lay there. And he said to Gehazi [**geh-HAY-zigh**] his servant, Call this Shunammite [**SHOE-numb-ight**]. And when he had called her, she stood before him. And he said unto him, Say now unto her, Behold, thou hast been careful for us with all this care; what is to be done for thee? wouldest thou be spoken for to the king, or to the captain of the host? And she answered, I dwell among mine own people. And he said, What then is to be done for her? And Gehazi [**geh-HAY-zigh**] answered, Verily she hath no child, and her husband is old. And he said, Call her. And when he had called her, she stood in the door. And he said, About this season, according to the time of life, thou shalt embrace a son. And she said, Nay, my lord, thou man of God, do not lie unto thine handmaid. And the woman conceived, and bare a son at that season that Elisha had said unto her, according to the time of life.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the twelfth Verse of the fourteenth Chapter of the Gospel according to St. Luke.⁵

“Then said he also to him that bade him, When thou makest a dinner or a supper, call not thy friends, nor thy brethren, neither thy kinsmen, nor thy rich neighbours; lest they also bid thee again, and a recompence be made thee. But when thou makest a feast, call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind: And thou shalt be blessed; for they cannot recompense thee: for thou shalt be recompensed at the resurrection of the just.

“And when one of them that sat at meat with him heard these things, he said unto him, Blessed is he that shall eat bread in the kingdom of God. Then said he unto him, A certain man made a great supper, and bade many: and sent his servant at supper time to say to them that were bidden, Come; for all things are now ready. And they all with one consent began to make excuse. The first said unto him, I have bought a piece of ground, and I must needs go and see it: I pray thee have me excused. And another said, I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to prove them: I pray thee have me excused. And another said, I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come. So that servant came, and shewed **[SHOWD]** his lord these things. Then the master of the house being angry said to his servant, Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in hither the poor, and the maimed, and the halt, and the blind. And the servant said, Lord, it is done as thou hast commanded, and yet there is room. And the lord said unto the servant, Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled. For I say unto you, that none of those men which were bidden shall taste of my supper.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “A certain man made a great supper, and bade many: and sent his servant at supper time to say to them that were bidden, Come; for all things are now ready. And they all with one consent began to make excuse.”⁶ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Introduction:

The parable which forms today’s Second Lesson is, like all true parables, a lesson about the Kingdom of Heaven. Here, as on one other occasion,⁷ Our Lord describes that Kingdom as a luxurious banquet. Also like all true parables, this one is in the form of a little vignette or short story, which could have been taken from the daily lives of his listeners or at least was framed from elements to which they, out of the experiences of those daily lives, could relate themselves.

Theme:

In hindsight, we see this parable as an obvious reference to the way Jesus was sent to but rejected by the Nation of Israel. Thus the host of the parable’s banquet invites first the favored, high-status members of his community, who represent the Jews, of whom Jesus said, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”⁸ These desirable guests, however, find various excuses for declining the host’s invitation and so were replaced by second choices. Those second choices represent the gentiles to whom Christ’s Apostles and disciples were sent.

It is on those initial guests’ excuses, and the historical and cultural background from which they were drawn, that we will focus this morning.

Development:

The Gospel account gives three of these excuses as representative samples of them all. One of these three prospective guests had bought a new field,⁹ one had acquired five yokes of oxen¹⁰ (the equivalent of a fleet of tractors), and one had married a new wife.¹¹ Each of these three representative invitees had no time for the banquet because he was preoccupied with enjoying his new acquisition.

Jesus' listeners would have immediately recognized the pattern of these excuses. They all follow the format set forth in the beginning of the twentieth Chapter of Deuteronomy, which itself comes from the period of the Israelites' initial invasion of the Promised Land.

In that invasion, the Lord had promised the Hebrews that He would be with them and would support them as they conquered the territory He had given them as their home. Deuteronomy, Chapter 20 lays down how the Israelites were to muster in the army that was to conduct the holy war to wrest the Promised Land from its Canaanite [**KANE-ann-ight**] occupiers.

According to Deuteronomy, that conquest was to be a total commitment by the Israelite people, but that commitment looked in two directions at once. It looked to the contemporaneous need for raising an army while it also looked to the prospective need for developing and maintaining a functioning society that would live and flourish in the territory that army would conquer for it.

Not only was God concerned that the Israelites muster sufficient troops to secure the land He had given them, but He was also concerned that the fabric of their daily lives would remain intact. The structures of their national life must remain healthy against the time when they would come into their inheritance. There would have been no point in

⁵ St. Luke 14:12-24 (KJV).

⁶ St. Luke 14:16:18a (KJV).

⁷ St. Matthew 22:1-14.

⁸ St. Matthew 15:24 (RSV).

⁹ St. Luke 14:18b.

¹⁰ St. Luke 14:19.

¹¹ St. Luke 14:20.

¹² Deuteronomy 20:8.

¹³ Deuteronomy 20:5.

¹⁴ Deuteronomy 20:6. It has been pointed out that this allowance was for a five-year period, *R. K. Harrison, Deuteronomy*, in D. GUTHRIE AND J. A. MOTYER, EDs., *THE NEW BIBLE COMMENTARY: REVISED*, 3rd ed. 222 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1970), citing Leviticus 19:23-25.

¹⁵ Deuteronomy 20:7.

¹⁶ *Harrison, op. cit.*

¹⁷ *Nixon, op. cit.; Marshall, op. cit.*

¹⁸ *Marshall, op. cit.*

¹⁹ St. Luke 10:10-11 (RSV).

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our sustenance.¹⁸ But that is always a possibility and therefore we must always be prepared to fulfill it.

In cases of extreme urgency, that possibility is the ultimate basis for martyrdom. Even in daily life it is the wellspring of true charity: that God's needs always take precedence over our personal needs. No one who is unwilling to face that precedence of needs can make anything except a purely facile commitment to Our Lord and to His service.

So it is entirely reasonable that Our Lord would test those He calls, by giving them one reasonable opportunity to heed His message and then, if that call is ignored, to pass on to more likely prospects. That, after all, is precisely what He instructed His missionaries to do: "[W]henver you enter a town and they do not receive you, go into its streets and say, 'Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off against you; nevertheless know this, that the kingdom of God has come near.'"¹⁹

As today's parable tells us, seats at the feast will always be filled; what we tend to forget, however, is that many of them will not be filled by those to whom they were first offered.

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¹ "Any set of Psalms and Lessons appointed for the evening of any day may be read at the morning service, and any set of morning Psalms and Lessons may be read in the evening." *Concerning the Service of the Church*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER viii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

² This sermon was originally written on the Gospel for Mass on the Second Sunday after Trinity, 2010.

³ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxvii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

⁴ II Kings 4:8-17 (KJV).

their conquering the land if thereafter it could not be lived upon in prosperity; this, after all, was to be the "land of milk and honey".

To assure the morale and integrity of the army, and that its members would support each other in the time of need, the faint-hearted were excused from service.¹² And in order to protect the future prosperity of the Israelite nation, certain warriors were to be excused, at least temporarily, from the battles that were otherwise obligatory for their contemporaries.

The building of an house is a quasi-religious act, perhaps even an actually religious one, as it is the founding of a family unit on the soil given to the Chosen People by God. Therefore, as the fulfillment of God's bounty, the inauguration of that home was the occasion for an exemption of the householder from military service.¹³ Having performed his assigned rôle to establish Israel's future in its national home, that family head would later be available for later calls to military service when needed in other crises.

Similarly, the building of essential infrastructure was vital to the future of the nation. This included such investments as the planting of vineyards and other agricultural improvements that take a considerable time from their commencements until their productivity. This need was especially great for a nation whose diet, like those of most Mediterranean peoples, was based on bread, olive oil, and wine.

When a vineyard has been planted, its safe and healthy development requires close attention and care until it is permanently established; it will be some years before it bears usable crops. Thus a farmer who had just made this investment in "sweat equity" was to stay home and tend it,¹⁴ thus assuring the future harvests upon which the population would depend. He, like the new householder, would always

be available for future calls to service; thus together these two formed a sort of military reserve force.

We should see in these two Deuteronomic exemptions rough parallels with the owners of the new field and of the newly-acquired oxen who declined the dinner invitation in the parable in today's Second Lesson. They are very rough parallels, however. The unwilling guests' preferred activities—merely surveying a field and merely exercising a new toy—are much less serious and time-consuming activities, and have much less significance for the long-term future, than do the major agricultural commitments to which Deuteronomy made reference.

And we may be sure that Christ's audience both heard and appreciated how frivolously, almost mockingly, those prospective guests were handling the important national and religious concerns that underlay Deuteronomy's excuses from service by using them as the ostensible basis for these guests' little socially-convenient "white lies".

Then, in the same vein, there is the bridegroom,¹⁵ who is to stay at home, planting the seed of a new generation of Israelites. He, too, like the householder and the vintner, can be called to military service after he has performed this other, vital service. But it is one thing for a new husband to absent himself from his bride for weeks or months with the army; it is quite something else for him to be away from home for a few hours one evening to attend a banquet.

Not only did Deuteronomy's original exemptions serve the larger purposes of the entire nation but they also had a military basis. They assured that Israelites absent on military service would not be distracted from their duties by legitimate preoccupations with affairs at home.¹⁶

Thus these prescriptions in Deuteronomy can be seen as exploring the contours of the issue of *commitment* to a

cause. In the Old Testament, that cause was the national security of God's Chosen People, which was undoubtedly an issue that trenches upon the divine.

That is to be contrasted, however, with today's Gospel, where the issue of *commitment* is to a cause that *is* unquestionably divine: the Kingdom of Heaven. As we first perceive this, it seems a purely personal question: as the street corner evangelist is wont to ask, does one wish to be saved? At a deeper level, however, that question is one of commitment to Our Lord on the part of those who have been called to join themselves to Him.

If it is essential to accomplishing a military mission that its members not be distracted by personal concerns, so much the more is it essential to the Lord's mission. Thus in today's Gospel, following the pattern of the service exemptions in Deuteronomy, Jesus warns how the faint-hearted and self-preoccupied decline, almost absent-mindedly, to make a commitment to follow Him.

There is, after all, what we may call "the fallacy of permanent opportunity". This is the assumption that whatever it is we may wish to do, we will always be able to opt for it or to return to it. So perhaps the guests invited to the feast thought there would always be another feast and the host, having forgotten their rude disregard for his hospitality, would make room for them on another occasion. Thus all too many seem to assume that once Christ calls them to Him, He, like the conscientious owner of a disobedient dog, will keep calling them until they come.

Conclusion:

The profession of a Christian, like service in the ancient Israelite army, is an absolute commitment.¹⁷ We are not always, or even often, called to leave home, family, and friends and to set out, dependent on the charity of others for