

Sermon for Evening Prayer¹
The First Sunday in Advent

Lessons:²

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the sixty-second Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.³

“For Zion’s sake will I not hold my peace, and for Jerusalem’s sake I will not rest, until the righteousness thereof go forth as brightness, and the salvation thereof as a lamp that burneth. And the Gentiles shall see thy righteousness, and all kings thy glory: and thou shalt be called by a new name, which the mouth of the LORD shall name. Thou shalt also be a crown of glory in the hand of the LORD, and a royal diadem in the hand of thy God. Thou shalt no more be termed Forsaken; neither shall thy land any more be termed Desolate: but thou shalt be called Hephzi-bah [**HEFF-zee-bah**], and thy land Beulah [**BEW-la**]: for the LORD delighteth in thee, and thy land shall be married.

“For as a young man marrieth a virgin, so shall thy sons marry thee: and as the bridegroom rejoiceth over the bride, so shall thy God rejoice over thee. I have set watchmen upon thy walls, O Jerusalem, which shall never hold their peace day nor night: ye that make mention of the LORD, keep not silence, And give him no rest, till he establish, and till he make Jerusalem a praise in the earth. The LORD hath sworn by his right hand, and by the arm of his strength, Surely I will no more give thy corn to be meat for thine enemies; and the sons of the stranger shall not drink thy wine, for the which thou has laboured: But they that have gathered it shall eat it, and praise the LORD; and they that have brought it together shall drink it in the courts of my holiness.

“Go through, go through the gates; prepare ye the way of the people; cast up, cast up the highway; gather out the stones; lift up a standard for the people. Behold, the LORD hath proclaimed unto the end of the world, Say ye to the daughter of Zion, Behold, thy salvation cometh; behold,

his reward is with him, and his work before him. And they shall call them, The holy people, The redeemed of the LORD: and thou shalt be called, Sought out, A city not forsaken.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the twenty-fifth Chapter of the Gospel According to Saint Matthew.⁴

“Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom. And five of them were wise, and five were foolish. They that were foolish took their lamps, and took no oil with them: But the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps. While the bridegroom tarried, they all slumbered and slept. And at midnight there was a cry made, Behold, the bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet him. Then all those virgins arose, and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said unto the wise, Give us of your oil; for our lamps are gone out. But the wise answered, saying, Not so; lest there be not enough for us and you: but go ye rather to them that sell, and buy for yourselves. And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came; and they that were ready went in with him to the marriage: and the door was shut. Afterward came also the other virgins, saying, Lord, Lord, open to us. But he answered and said, Verily I say unto you, I know you not. Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the First Lesson:

⁸ There was a belief that Elijah would reappear to herald the coming of the Messiah, Malachi 4: 5-6, which is why some of the Jews who saw Jesus or heard of Him assumed that He was Elijah, St. Matthew 16: 13-14. In fact, of course, it was John the Baptist who proved to be the Fore-runner, not a resurrected Elijah.

⁹ Exodus 34: 29-35.

¹⁰ St. Matthew 17: 2-9; St. Mark 9: 2-10; St. Luke 9: 29-36.

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² St. Matthew 24: 42 (RSV); *cf.* St. Mark 13: 35 and St. Luke 12: 40.

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“And they shall be called The holy people,
The redeemed of the LORD;
and you shall be called Sought out,
a city not forsaken.”⁵

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

Homily:

The entire Old Testament can, from one perspective, be summarized as the account of how God created humanity to be His special possession and how, by the misuse of its God-like power of free will, that humanity drove God away from it and so destroyed the original and essential fellowship that had existed between them. Then the New Testament is the account of how this breach between God and mankind was healed through God’s gracious and self-sacrificing offering of Himself for us.

Thus it is that Isaiah addressed the people of the Old Testament and reminded them that they were, or at least were intended by God to be, an holy people. And Isaiah promised them, in the name of the Lord, that they would be redeemed, that is, would be restored to fellowship with God, and so would once again be the people whom God had sought out to be His own:

“Behold, the LORD has proclaimed
to the end of the earth:
Say to the daughter of Zion,
‘Behold, your salvation comes;...’”⁶

Like a city favored by its ruler, who makes it his capital, glorifying and adorning it to befit his rule, they would become the seat of God’s government over the universe and so would reflect His glory.

The ancient Jews waited all through the Old Testament period for the coming of the One who would bring that promised salvation. In fact, they waited even beyond the time in which the Old Testament Scriptures were written, for several more centuries into and through what we call the Intertestamental Period. And when that Saviour did finally come, He came in the fashion described in today's Second Lesson.

The parable of the five wise maidens and the five foolish maidens begins with the frank acknowledgement that it, like all parables, is a teaching about the nature of the Kingdom of Heaven: "Then the kingdom of heaven shall be compared to ten maidens who took their lamps...."⁷ The point of the story is, quite simply, that one cannot know when the Lord will come, so one who would meet Him must necessarily be in a state of constant preparation so as not to miss one's chance.

This was, in fact, what happened to so many of the Jews when the Saviour did finally come among them and so inaugurate the New Testament period. Their expectations were fixed on their own conceptions of who that Saviour would be and how He would appear: perhaps he would be Moses come again, or Elijah reappeared,⁸ but unquestionably he would be someone who would appear in an easily perceived *shekinah* [**she-KYE-nuh**] or "glory", the painfully intense aura of light that would attest to the divinity of his mission as Moses' similar transfiguration had attested to his.⁹

Of course, as we know, the Messiah did appear in that *shekinah*, that "glory", but the general populace did not see it. Instead, only Peter, James, and John, among the Apostles, were permitted to be present at the Transfiguration¹⁰ that attested to Christ's divinity. And on that occasion, Moses and Elijah both did reappear, but neither came to be the Messiah himself; instead, both came and accompanied

Him within the *shekinah*¹¹ to attest that it was Jesus Who was that Messiah.

Conclusion:

So the ancient Jews were unprepared for the coming of that Messiah Who did not fit their preconceptions of Him and, thus, most of them, through their lack of attention, missed the event for which they had been so long waiting, just as the five foolish maidens missed the wedding feast for which they had been waiting.

We know better than they did, for we know that He did indeed come. But we also know that He will likewise come again, and again will do so in the *shekinah* or "glory", and it is that next Coming that we, like those ancient Jews, are in danger of missing by concentrating on our own preoccupations and concerns. For the parable of the ten maidens applies just as much to that next Coming as it did to the one we will celebrate at Christmas: "Watch therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming."¹²

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The Rev'd Canon John A. Hollister¹³
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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 *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xli (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

³ Isaiah 62: 1-12 (KJV).

⁴ St. Matthew 25: 1-13 (KJV).

⁵ Isaiah 62: 12 (RSV).

⁶ Isaiah 62: 11a (RSV).

⁷ St. Matthew 25: 1a (RSV).