

Sermon for Evening Prayer¹
The Second Sunday in Advent

Lessons:²

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the third Chapter of Amos.³

“Hear this word that the LORD hath spoken against you, O children of Israel, against the whole family which I brought up from the land of Egypt, saying, You only have I known of all the families of the earth: therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities. Can two walk together, except they be agreed? Will a lion roar in the forest, when he hath no prey? will a young lion cry out of his den, if he have taken nothing? Can a bird fall in a snare upon the earth, where no gin is for him? shall one take up a snare from the earth, and have taken nothing at all? Shall a trumpet be blown in the city, and the people not be afraid? shall there be evil in a city, and the Lord hath not done it? Surely the Lord God will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret unto his servants the prophets. The lion hath roared, who will not fear? the Lord God hath spoken, who can but prophesy?”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the second Chapter of the First Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Thessalonians.⁴

“For yourselves, brethren, know our entrance in unto you, that it was not in vain: But even after that we had suffered before, and were shamefully entreated, as ye know, at Philippi, we were bold in our God to speak unto you the gospel of God with much contention. For our exhortation was not of deceit, nor of uncleanness, nor in guile: But as we were allowed of God to be put in trust with the gospel, even so we speak; not as pleasing men, but God, which trieth our hearts. For neither at any time used we flattering words, as

ye know, nor a cloak of covetousness; God is witness: Nor of men sought we glory, neither of you, nor yet of others, when we might have been burdensome, as the apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, even as a nurse cherisheth her children: So being affectionately desirous of you, we were willing to have imparted unto you, not the gospel of God only, but also our own souls, because ye were dear unto us. For ye remember, brethren, our labour and travail: for labouring night and day, because we would not be chargeable unto any of you, we preached unto you the gospel of God. Ye are witnesses, and God also, how holily and justly and unblameably we behaved ourselves among you that believe: As ye know how we exhorted and comforted and charged every one of you, as father doth his children. That ye would walk worthy of God, who hath called you unto his kingdom and glory. For this cause also we thank God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “[J]ust as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak not to please men, but to please God who tests our hearts.”⁵ In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Homily:

Saint Paul addresses the Thessalonians using for himself pronouns that are placed in the second personal plural: “*our* entrance”, “*we* had suffered”, and so on. Perhaps this is merely his way of speaking on behalf of himself and his companions in mission. On the other hand, perhaps it is a

subtle way of emphasizing his Apostolic authority, that is, what we in English sometimes call “the royal ‘we’” or “the editorial ‘we’”.

But whatever it was that motivated Paul to choose this form of self-description, it has left his words to the Thessalonians, and therefore to us, in a form that we can apply directly to ourselves: “[J]ust as *we* have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so *we* speak not to please men, but to please God who tests *our* hearts.”⁶

Notice, please, that there is a stimulus-and-response form to this statement. First, the stimulus: Paul reminds us that he, and indeed all Christians, and therefore we, too, who sit here to listen to this sermon, have all been approved by God to be entrusted with the Gospel. Then, the response: precisely because he, they, and we have been entrusted with that treasure, we are required to speak it to other men, paying no attention to how welcome it may be to them, but taking account only of how welcome it may be to the God Who was the One who entrusted us with it.

Let us stop here a moment and consider that word “approved”, which the Revised Standard Version uses where the King James Version uses “allowed”. “Approved” comes from the root “proof” and so carries the connotation of “having been tested and passed that test”, as when a firearm is “proved” and then stamped with a “proof mark” that is the gunmaker’s equivalent of the jeweler’s “hall mark”.

In other words, we, as persons who have joined the Christian Faith, have been tested in some way, not least by being questioned, in person or through our baptismal sponsors, as to our belief in and commitment to that Faith, and have been found to have passed that examination.⁷

It also carries the connotation of “having been accepted or certified”. Thus in Confirmation the Bishop prays

for the confirmands, referring to them as “these thy servants, upon whom, after the example of thy holy Apostles, we have now laid our hands, *to certify them*, by this sign, of thy favor and gracious goodness towards them.”⁸

And this testing and certifying is to enable us – and therefore, to require us – to fulfill Our Lord’s last commandment to us: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.”⁹

So it is that St. Paul spoke, and we must speak, of what we have been given, so as to please God and not those around us. Of course, I exaggerated earlier when I said “we are required to speak it to other men, paying no attention to how welcome it may be to them....”

We most certainly must pay attention to how welcome the Gospel may be to others, in order to shape our presentation of it to their present situation and understanding. I recently heard a licensed counselor illustrate this truth by saying, “We must meet our clients where they are.”

Conclusion:

This is an important principle: whenever we set out to do good for others, whether by carrying to them the knowledge and love of God or by helping them to resolve their personal problems, we must, as the Quakers say, “speak to their condition”.

But that is simply a question of how we present the Gospel we have been charged to deliver to them. What we must not do is to let their lack of receptiveness dissuade us from presenting it in any form whatever.

Most often, and most difficult for us, the evangelists, the most acceptable as well as the most effective presentation of it is the way those we would evangelize perceive that Gospel in action, not only on our lips but in our lives.

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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 xi (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

³ Amos 3: 1-8 (KJV).

⁴ I Thessalonians 2: 1-13 (KJV).

⁵ I Thessalonians 2: 4 (RSV).

⁶ I Thessalonians 2: 4 (RSV) (emphasis supplied).

⁷ *The Ministration of Holy Baptism*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 276-278 (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

⁸ *The Order of Confirmation*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 298 (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

⁹ St. Matthew 28: 19-20 (RSV).

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