

Sermon for Morning Prayer The First Sunday in Lent

Lessons:¹

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

“Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and shew my people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins. Yet they seek me daily, and delight to know my ways, as a nation that did righteousness, and forsook not the ordinance of their God: they ask of me the ordinances of justice; they take delight in approaching to God.

“Wherefore have we fasted, say they, and thou seest not? wherefore have we afflicted our soul, and thou takest no knowledge? Behold, in the day of your fast ye find pleasure, and exact all your labours. Behold, ye fast for strife and debate, and to smite with the fist of wickedness: ye shall not fast as ye do this day, to make your voice to be heard on high. Is it such a fast that I have chosen? a day for a man to afflict his soul? is it to bow down his head as a bulrush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? wilt thou call this a fast, and an acceptable day to the LORD? Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke? Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh?

“Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily: and thy righteousness shall go before thee; the glory of the LORD shall be thy rereward³ [**REAR-ee-ward**]. Then shalt thou call, and the LORD shall answer; thou shalt cry, and he shall say, Here I am. If thou take away from the midst of thee the yoke, the putting forth of the finger, and speaking vanity; And if thou draw out thy soul to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul; then shall thy light rise in obscurity, and thy darkness

⁷ *Ibid.* 6:5a (RSV).

⁸ Isaiah 58:13-14 (RSV).

⁹ Isaiah 58:4b-5 (RSV).

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 58:6-7 (RSV).

¹¹ Article XII, Of Good Works, *Articles of Religion*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 605 (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

¹² Psalm 51:16-17 (MCV), The Book of Common Prayer 404 (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

¹³ Isaiah 58:10b-11 (RSV).

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be as the noon day: And the LORD shall guide thee continually, and satisfy thy soul in drought, and make fat thy bones: and thou shalt be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not. And they that shall be of thee shall build the old waste places: thou shalt raise up the foundations of many generations; and thou shalt be called, The repairer of the breach, The restorer of paths to dwell in.

“If thou turn away thy foot from the sabbath, from doing thy pleasure on my holy day; and call the sabbath a delight, the holy of the LORD, honourable; and shalt honour him, not doing thine own ways, nor finding thine own pleasure, nor speaking thine own words: Then shalt thou delight thyself in the LORD; and I will cause thee to ride upon the high places of the earth, and feed thee with the heritage of Jacob thy father: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the sixth Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Matthew.⁴

“Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven. Therefore when thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth: That thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly.

“And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and

This is also the message of the Articles of Religion: that by “Good Works, which are the fruits of Faith, ... are pleasing and acceptable to God in Christ, and do spring out necessarily of a true and lively Faith: insomuch that by them a lively Faith may be as evidently known as a tree discerned by the fruit.”¹¹ It is also the message of the Psalmist:

“For thou desirest no sacrifice, else would I give it thee; * but thou delightest not in burnt-offerings.

The sacrifice of God is a troubled spirit; * a broken and contrite heart, O God, shalt thou not despise.”¹²

Conclusion:

If we plan sincerely our Lenten rules of life and disciplines, in order to improve our relationship with God and not to increase our status with our neighbors, then Isaiah promises that the Lord will be with us and will care for us:

“[T]hen shall your light rise in the darkness
and your gloom be as the noonday.
And the Lord will guide you continually,
and satisfy your desire with good things,
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water, whose waters fail not.”¹³

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The Rev'd Canon John A. Hollister¹⁴
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¹ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER x (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

² Isaiah 58:1-14 (KJV).

³ *I.e.*, “rear guard”.

⁴ St. Matthew 6:1-18 (KJV).

⁵ *Ibid.* 6:16a (KJV).

⁶ St. Matthew 6:1 (RSV).

then you shall take delight in the LORD,
and I will make you ride upon the heights of the
earth;
I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your
father,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”⁸

3. God asks that we evidence our faith and commitment by amending our behavior, our way of life, not merely altering our devotional practices.

In today’s First Lesson, Isaiah warns us that merely going through the forms of devotion is not pleasing to God; what He seeks is real service to Him in the form of service to His people:

“Fasting like yours this day
will not make your voice to be heard on high.
Is such the fast that I choose,
a day for a man to humble himself?
Is it to bow down his head like a rush,
and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him?
Will you call this a fast,
and a day acceptable to the LORD?”⁹

Rather, he tells us:

“Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of wickedness,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover him,
and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?”¹⁰

thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly. But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking. Be not ye therefore like unto them: for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him. After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen. For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

“Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “[W]hen ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast...”⁵ In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Introduction:

Someone once wrote that it is our peculiar vice as Christians to be proud of our humility. It is precisely this

natural tendency toward self-exaltation and hypocrisy that both Isaiah and Our Lord address in today's Lessons.

I say this tendency is "natural" because it is, of course, the inevitable product of our nature, of that inborn human tendency to error that theologians call "original sin".

Theme:

The theme of today's Lessons is well summarized by St. Matthew's opening verse, which in the Revised Standard Version reads as follows:

"Beware of practicing your piety before men in order to be seen by them; for then you will have no reward from your father who is in heaven."⁶ And again: "[W]hen you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by men."⁷

Development:

1. This tendency to hypocritical show is an especial danger for us in this penitential season of Lent.

We are now in a season of the Church year that is marked by a number of visibly special observances. We began it on Ash Wednesday, by taking the time out of our mid-week schedules to go to church for a special service. Many of our parishes schedule extra Lenten services, on Fridays and sometimes on Wednesdays as well. Often they lengthen the normal services, as by commencing them with the recitation of the Litany or by combining Morning Prayer and the Eucharist.

Yet in ordinary times all too many of us simply cannot be bothered to rearrange our activities so we can go to church more than once a week.

At that first service of the season, we received on our foreheads a strange and very public mark, the smear of ashes that we receive and wear on only one day out of the entire year. And we are encouraged during this season to adopt special disciplines and special rules of life, such as the famous "Lenten Fast", all of which create multiple situations in which others will become aware of our devotional practices: "No thank you, I'll pass on the meat; I've given it up for Lent."

2. Isaiah tells us that the difference between piety and hypocrisy is the difference in our motive for engaging in particular devotional practices.

There are, indeed, two legitimate purposes for a practice such as the imposition of ashes or abstinence from meat. It is, and should be, a stark and unmistakable reminder to each of us that this is a penitential season, not just what some now call "Ordinary Time". Also, it is, and should be, a sort of visual evangelism, a reminder to those outside the Church that at this time the people of God are met together to worship Him in a special way.

The difference between legitimate witness and dangerous hypocrisy lies not in what we do devotionally, for depending on the circumstances, precisely the same acts may be either worshipful or hypocritical. The difference lies in our motives for doing them. God want us to do them for the purpose of pleasing Him, not of impressing other humans with the strictness of our observances:

"If you turn back your foot from the sabbath,
from doing your pleasure on my holy day,
and call the sabbath a delight and the holy day of the
LORD honorable;
if you honor it, not going your own ways,
or seeking your own pleasure, or talking idly,