

SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYER¹
The Sunday Next Before Advent

Lessons:²

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the ninth Verse of the eleventh Chapter of Ecclesiastes, or, The Preacher.³

“Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth; and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes: but know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment. Therefore remove sorrow from thy heart, and put away evil from thy flesh: for childhood and youth are vanity.

“Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them; While the sun, or the light, or the moon, or the stars, be not darkened, nor the clouds return after the rain: In the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble, and the strong men shall bow themselves, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those that look out of the windows be darkened, And the doors shall be shut in the streets, when the sound of the grinding is low, and he shall rise up at the voice of the bird, and all the daughters of music shall be brought low; Also when they shall be afraid of that which is high, and fears shall be in the way, and the almond tree shall flourish, and the grasshopper shall be a burden, and desire shall fail: because man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets: Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern. Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.

“Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher; all is vanity....

“Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty

of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the thirteenth Chapter of the Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews.⁴

“Let brotherly love continue. Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them; and them which suffer adversity, as being yourselves also in the body. Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled: but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge. Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee. So that we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me. Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation. Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever. Be not carried about with divers and strange doctrines. For it is a good thing that the heart be established with grace; not with meats, which have not profited them that have been occupied therein. We have an altar, whereof they have no right to eat which serve the tabernacle. For the bodies of those beasts, whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest for sin, are burned without the camp. Wherefore Jesus also, that he might sanctify the people with his own blood, suffered without the gate. Let us go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach. For here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come. By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name. But to do good and to communicate forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased. Obey them that have the rule over

⁹ *The Order for The Administration of the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 80 (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

¹⁰ Philippians 2:12 (KJV).

¹¹ Psalm 51:15-17 (RSV). *Accord:* Psalm 50:8-14.

¹² Proverbs 21:3 (RSV).

¹³ St. Matthew 16:18.

¹⁴ Acts 20:28; 1 Corinthians 12:28.

¹⁵ Ephesians 1:22-23, 2:21-22, 5:23-34.

¹⁶ Hebrews 13:17a (KJV).

¹⁷ Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 8:6-13.

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victing us of our sinful behavior, without offering us any remedy for it, now we have the saving grace of God mediated to us through Jesus Christ, if we choose to avail ourselves of it.

Conclusion:

And if Christ's chosen means of bringing us that grace is through the institutional Church—and it is—then part of availing ourselves of that grace is regarding and obeying the teachings and guidance of that Church and of its leaders whom He has set over it, and therefore over us, for our own good.

From this perspective, when Billy Bob or Jimmy Joe declares that he can be saved as a personal transaction just between himself and Jesus Christ, along with that Bible (that he apparently does not read very closely), that is actually an act, not of submission to Our Lord, but instead it is an act of rebellion against Him.

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The Rev'd Canon John A. Hollister¹⁸
November 20, 2011.

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 Ecclesiastes 11:9—12:8, 13-14 (KJV).

⁴ Hebrews 13:1-21 (KJV).

⁵ Hebrews 13:17a (KJV).

⁶ Galatians 1:4; 1 Timothy 2:6; 2 Timothy 1:9; Titus 3:4-6; Hebrews 5:9, 7:25.

⁷ 1 Timothy 4:10.

⁸ Hebrews 4:1-3.

you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you. Pray for us: for we trust we have a good conscience, in all things willing to live honestly. But I beseech you the rather to do this, that I may be restored to you the sooner. Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, Make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is wellpleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account...”⁵ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Homily:

There is a common fallacy which holds that Christianity is an individualistic endeavor – that the essential saving relationship that Christ came to institute is one strictly between Him and one individual believer. This error, in turn, leads to all sorts of odd beliefs and behaviors, such as when a person comes up to one, reaches in his or her wallet, pulls out a card, and says something like “I was saved on June 16, 1976!”

That statement, of course, ignores the patent fact that the person concerned was saved on a particular day in approximately 33 A.D., on the day Our Lord died on the Cross on Calvary⁶—and that was something that saved not just one

person but all of mankind. All that happened on June 16, 1976 (or whatever other date may have been announced) was that this one person made a decision to avail himself or herself of what Jesus Christ has already done for him or her,⁷ and that is something that concerns no one but the single person who made that decision.

Of course, some people never think about making that decision and others think about it in a desultory way but never get around actually to doing it. Those inattentive or dilatory people will not receive the benefits⁸ of Our Lord's "one oblation of himself once offered",⁹ which is why, for example, St. Paul told the Philippians, and therefore us as well, that we are to "work out our salvation in fear and trembling".¹⁰

Certainly, part of that working out of our salvation is recognizing the immense sacrifice God has made for us in order that we might believe we are saved. Notice I said "that we might believe we are saved", because God Himself has no need of sacrifices in order to initiate His loving acts on our behalf, as the Psalmist says:

"O Lord, open thou my lips,
and my mouth shall show forth thy praise.
For thou hast no delight in sacrifice;
were I to give a burnt offering,
thou wouldst not be pleased.
The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt
not despise."¹¹

And similarly, we are told in Proverbs:

"To do righteousness and justice
is more acceptable to the LORD
than sacrifice."¹²

So it is we ourselves whose limitations in belief and understanding need the physical action of sacrifice to convince ourselves of the reality of what God has already freely done for us.

Another of these odd beliefs or behaviors that arises out of this individualistic fallacy is the notion that the individual Christian can have a satisfactory relationship with Jesus Christ apart from, and outside, the Church. We sometimes hear this expressed—perhaps by someone with the name Billy Bob or Jimmy Joe—in words something like, "It's just me and you and muh Bobble, Jesus!"

But that attitude ignores the patent fact that this very Bible tells us that Christ established an institutional structure for His followers. So to say that salvation is intended to be found without reference to that Church is to say, in effect, that Our Lord engaged in a vain and useless act when He founded His Church,¹³ appointed leaders to oversee it,¹⁴ and called us into it.¹⁵ At the very best, that seems to me a highly presumptuous conclusion, implying as it does that we know better what we need to be saved than did the Son of God.

However, if Christ Himself founded the Church, called us into it, and appointed leaders to oversee it, then He also appointed those leaders to oversee each of us. That brings us to the verse from Hebrews that I selected as my text this morning: "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account...."¹⁶

We, no less than the ancient Hebrews, are a covenant people.¹⁷ Only two things have changed from their time to ours. One is that God has opened outwards the boundaries of the Covenant, so that now all people, and not just the descendants of one tribal sheik, have the opportunity of joining it. The other is that instead of that Covenant's merely con-