

Sermon for Morning Prayer
The Feast of St. Mark the Evangelist

Lessons:¹

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the sixth Verse of the sixty-second Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.²

“... 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 fourth Verse of the fifteenth Chapter of the Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Romans.³

“... For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope. Now the God of patience and consolation grant you to be likeminded one toward another according to Christ Jesus: That ye may with

one mind and one mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Wherefore receive ye one another, as Christ also received us to the glory of God. Now I say that Jesus Christ was a minister of the circumcision for the truth of God, to confirm the promises made unto the fathers: And that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy; as it is written, For this cause I will confess to thee among the Gentiles, and sing unto thy name. And again he saith, Rejoice, ye Gentiles, with his people. And again, Praise the Lord, all ye Gentiles; and laud him, all ye people. And again, Esaias⁴ [ee-ZYE-uss] saith, There shall be a root of Jesse, and he that shall rise to reign over the Gentiles; in him shall the Gentiles trust. Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the First Lesson: “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.”⁵ In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Introduction:

Today,⁶ the Feast of St. Mark, is a very special day for me. It is the twenty-third anniversary of my ordination⁷ to the diaconate by our late and very much lamented Archbishop Michael Dean Stephens, then the Bishop Ordinary of our then-fledgling Missionary Diocese of New Orleans.

An anniversary such as this is naturally a time for reflection. Certainly there is the usual mundane and rather meaningless observations to the effect of “Has it really been

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April 25, 2010.

¹ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xliv (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

² Isaiah 62: 6-12 (KJV).

³ Romans 15: 4-13 (KJV).

⁴ *I.e.*, Isaiah. The literal-minded translators of the Authorized or King James Version tended to leave Old Testament names mentioned in the Greek texts of the New Testament in forms related to their Greek transliterations rather than to revert to the more Hebraic Old Testament forms.

⁵ Isaiah 62: 6-7 (KJV).

⁶ In A.D. 2010, that is.

⁷ April 25, 1987.

⁸ Isaiah 62: 11b-12a (KJV).

⁹ *The Form and Manner of Making Deacons*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 533 (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ Romans 15: 5-6 (KJV).

¹² Romans 15: 8-9 (KJV).

¹³ Isaiah 62: 6-7 (KJV).

¹⁴ Assisting Priest, Christ Anglican Catholic Church, Metairie LA. Honorary Canon, the Diocese of the Resurrection, and Honorary Canon and Canon to the Ordinary, The Diocese of New Orleans, The Anglican Catholic Church.

that long?" coupled with the seemingly inconsistent, "It seems to have been almost yesterday!" Where more than a third of my life has been spent in Holy Orders, it can be difficult to remember what life as a layman was really like; my present state simply seems, as it ought, to be what I was always meant to be.

Theme:

But on such an occasion there are more serious and less self-preoccupied reflections as well. One is the recollection of the deep sense of fear I felt just before that ordination. I spent a sleepless night, trembling at the recognition of how unworthy I was and how my inadequacies might well bring shame on me and on the Church. If a dear, good man had not sat up with me, talking me through what was about to happen and reminding me that if God had truly called me, He knew me and had called me "warts and all", I would have left the Bishop standing at the altar like a jilted bride.

Development:

So it is well, on a day such as this, to stop for a moment and consider just what those obligations were that I found – and still find – so terrifying. Some of them are illustrated by the lessons appointed for Morning Prayer today.

One of those responsibilities of the clergy is that of *proclaiming the Good News*. This is to be announced both to the world that has not yet joined the Covenant with God and also to those who already live within that Covenant, to remind them of what it means to them. As Isaiah says in today's First Lesson: "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...."⁸

This is referred to at least twice in the service for the ordination of a Deacon, when the Bishop questions the candidate. First, the Bishop asks, “Will you diligently read the [Holy Scriptures] unto the people assembled in the Church where you shall be appointed to serve?” To which the candidate must answer, “I will.”⁹

Shortly after that, the Bishop asks the candidate, “It appertaineth to the Office of a Deacon, in the Church where he shall be appointed to serve, ... to read the Holy Scriptures and Homilies in the Church; and to instruct the youth in the Catechism; ... and to preach, if he be admitted thereto by the Bishop.... Will you do this gladly and willingly?” Again, the candidate must answer, “I will.”¹⁰

In the Deacon’s teaching and preaching, he must loudly and constantly give praise to God, both because doing so is the essence of all true worship and because the act of uniting in giving such praise is part of which knits the Christian community together. So in today’s Second Lesson, St. Paul told the Romans, “Now the God of patience and consolation grant you to be likeminded one toward another according to Christ Jesus: That ye may with one mind and one mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”¹¹

And again, “Now I say that Jesus Christ was a minister of the circumcision for the truth of God, to confirm the promises made unto the fathers: And that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy; as it is written, For this cause I will confess to thee among the Gentiles, and sing unto thy name.”¹²

After more than two decades spent as a Deacon – for we clergy are all Deacons, even after we are promoted to the Priesthood -- , I really cannot imagine being or doing anything else. I know for certain that I have not done it as well as I ought to have done, for not only is it part of the human

condition always to fall short of the mark, but, painfully, I can all too easily remember all too many occasions when I could have done better.

Nevertheless, I have done it, not nearly as well as some but, thankfully, better than some others. And I know of at least a few situations in which I have been able to do a few things that have brought benefit to some.

It has been, and continues to be, an immense privilege to serve God by serving His people. They have given me a depth of acceptance and love that I could never adequately describe, except to say that almost always they are pleased to see me coming, which makes a very nice change from the reactions I got during my first career as a police officer!

Conclusion:

Perhaps the greatest privilege the men and women of the Church grant to their clergy is that of being with them at some of the most important moments of their lives. To baptize a newborn, to instruct a child, to witness the marriage of a young couple, to be received by someone who is bravely struggling with illness, to be entrusted with the confessions of the faithful, and, at the end, to pronounce God’s blessing over them as they are buried; these are things that bring as much joy as they bring humility.

So I thank God for permitting me all these years to serve as a watchman upon His walls, standing guard over you, His people. I, even more than you, am thrilled to the bottom of my being when I know I am one of those about whom Isaiah proclaimed, “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.”¹³