

Sermon for Morning Prayer
The Third Sunday After Trinity

Lessons:¹

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the thirty-first Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah.²

“At the same time, saith the LORD, will I be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be my people. Thus saith the LORD, The people which were left of the sword found grace in the wilderness; even Israel, when I went to cause him to rest. The LORD hath appeared of old unto me, saying, Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee. Again I will build thee, and thou shalt be built, O virgin of Israel: thou shalt again be adorned with thy tabrets, and shalt go forth in the dances of them that make merry. Thou shalt yet plant vines upon the mountains of Samaria: the planters shall plant, and shall eat them as common things. For there shall be a day, that the watchmen upon the mount Ephraim [**EFF-rah-eem**] shall cry, Arise ye, and let us go up to Zion unto the LORD our God. For thus saith the LORD; Sing with gladness for Jacob, and shout among the chief of the nations: publish ye, praise ye, and say, O LORD, save thy people, the remnant of Israel. Behold, I will bring them from the north country, and gather them from the coasts of the earth, and with them the blind and the lame, the woman with child and her that travaileth with child together: a great company shall return thither. They shall come with weeping, and with supplications will I lead them: I will cause them to walk by the rivers of waters in a straight way, wherein they shall not stumble: for I am a father to Israel, and Ephraim [**EFF-rah-eem**] is my firstborn.

“Hear the word of the LORD, O ye nations, and declare it in the isles afar off, and say, He that scattered Israel will gather him, and keep him, as a shepherd doth his flock. For the LORD hath redeemed Jacob, and ransomed him from the hand of him that was stronger than he. Therefore they shall come and sing in the height of Zion, and shall flow to-

gether to the goodness of the LORD, for wheat, and for wine, and for oil, and for the young of the flock and of the herd: and their soul shall be as a watered garden; and they shall not sorrow any more at all. Then shall the virgin rejoice in the dance, both young men and old together: for I will turn their mourning into joy, and will comfort them, and make them rejoice from their sorrow. And I will satiate the soul of the priests with fatness, and my people shall be satisfied with my goodness, saith the LORD.

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the ninth Verse of the ninth Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Matthew.³

“And as Jesus passed forth from thence, he saw a man, named Matthew, sitting at the receipt of custom: and he saith unto him, Follow me. And he arose, and followed him.

“And it came to pass, as Jesus sat at meat in the house, behold, many publicans and sinners came and sat down with him and his disciples. And when the Pharisees saw it, they said unto his disciples, Why eateth your Master with publicans and sinners? But when Jesus heard that, he said unto them, They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick. But go ye and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice: for I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “[W]hen the Pharisees saw it, they said unto his disciples, Why eateth your Master with publicans and sinners?”⁴ In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Introduction, Theme, and Development:

I grew up in a family which read British mystery stories almost – dare I say it? – religiously. One of my first encounters with adult literature, which occurred long, long before I was anywhere close to being an adult myself, was picking up an old paperback copy of Agatha Christie’s “The ABC Murders” and getting lost in it.

So from a very early age, I felt completely conversant with the “publicans” who populated those mysteries and who operated the “pubs” – which I knew was short for “public houses” or taverns – that apparently occupied every street corner in Britain, the way gas stations do here. These publicans were always quiet, sage men, fonts of local knowledge, always ready to draw a comforting pint from their taps and lend a comforting ear to the musings of visitors.

So, too, when I began reading the New Testament, in the King James Version of course, I was a bit puzzled by the hostility the Pharisees so frequently and bitterly expressed toward “publicans”. I mean, how does the occasional pint of mild and bitter threaten to undermine the entire fabric of religion and society?

It must have been in high school that I experienced the dual influences of intensive courses in Shakespeare, with a consequent growing understanding of Jacobean English, and Ancient History, which introduced me to the Roman custom of farming out the taxes in distant provinces of the Empire. It was at that point that I learned that in the early 17th Century “publican” could mean not just “licensee of a public house” or “innkeeper”, but also “worker under a public contract”, *i.e.*, “worker for the state”.

At that same point, I also learned that in the First Century A.D., one of the principal forms of such public con-

tracts let by the Roman Senate was the “tax farm”, under which a syndicate of wealthy investors would prepay to the Roman treasury the estimated yearly taxes from an entire province. Then these speculators, through local agents hired for the purpose, would recoup their investment and go on to make a profit by collecting the actual taxes directly from the population.

Where the population in question was a defeated people under military occupation, as were the Jews in Palestine, an arrangement such as this would always be resented and would always be subject to abuses such as excessive collections. Indeed, tax farms are so inherently liable to abuses that, 1,700 years after the time we are considering, they were one of the principal causes of the French Revolution.

Tax collectors are never popular, whatever the era or the culture in which they operate. The situation in Palestine was unique, however. Not only had the Jews previously been an independent nation, and so naturally resentment of Roman hegemony, but they regarded themselves as a holy nation as well.

Thus the individual Jews who hired out as local operatives for the tax farmers were not only seen as agents of the political and military oppressors – essentially as traitors to the nation – but the occupation they were supporting was a religious defilement as well. When this is understood, depth of the Pharisees’ hatred for the tax collectors becomes much easier to understand.

This brings us to St. Matthew, whose calling by Jesus to be one of the original Apostles is the subject of today’s Second Lesson. When he encountered Our Lord, Matthew was “sitting at the receipt of custom”,⁵ that is, he was sitting at a table or desk, collecting taxes, probably in the market place. As we can easily infer from the tone of the Pharisees’ remarks – and the Pharisees were highly respected religious

leaders, looked up to by the people and very much moulders of opinion in that community at that time – Matthew was essentially an “untouchable”, a pariah rejected by all decent Jewish society.

Yet it was precisely this Quisling, this outcast, this traitor to the social, political, and religious sensibilities of his nation, whom Jesus called to be one of His inner circle and to be a leader in the Church that Our Lord was in the process of founding. It was this complete undesirable who was to be a member of the college of anointed Apostles who were to be Jesus own successors and to whom His extraordinary authority and powers would be confided.

It was this same outcast who, redeemed by just two words, “follow me”, would become the author of one of the canonical Gospels. If ever there was an inspiring example of the limitless nature of God’s forgiveness and love, St. Matthew must surely be it.

And what Our Lord did for St. Matthew with two little words, He will do for us. All we are required to do is what St. Matthew did when called: to stand up and follow Him.

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

² Jeremiah 31:1-14 (KJV).

³ St. Matthew 9:9-13 (KJV).

⁴ St. Matthew 9:11 (KJV).

⁵ St. Matthew 9:9 (KJV).

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