

**SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYER<sup>1</sup>**  
**The Fourth Sunday in Lent<sup>2</sup>**

**The Rev. Warren E. Shaw,<sup>3</sup> Supply Priest**

**Lessons:<sup>4</sup>**

**The First Lesson:** Here beginneth the fifty-fifth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.<sup>5</sup>

“Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread? and your labour for that which satisfieth not? hearken diligently unto me, and eat ye that which is good, and let your soul delight itself in fatness. Incline your ear, and come unto me: hear, and your soul shall live; and I will make an everlasting covenant with you, even the sure mercies of David. Behold, I have given him for a witness to the people, a leader and commander to the people. Behold, thou shalt call a nation that thou knowest not, and nations that knew not thee shall run unto thee because of the LORD thy God, and for the Holy One of Israel; for he hath glorified thee.

“Seek ye the LORD while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near: Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith [SETH] the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts. For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater: So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it. For ye shall go out with joy, and be led forth with peace: the mountains and the

hills shall break forth before you into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the fir tree, and instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle tree: and it shall be to the LORD for a name, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

**The Second Lesson:** Here beginneth the forty-first Verse of the sixth Chapter of the Gospel according to St. John.<sup>6</sup>

“... The Jews then murmured at him, because he said, I am the bread which came down from heaven. And they said, Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? how is it then that he saith [SETH], I came down from heaven? Jesus therefore answered and said unto them, Murmur not among yourselves. No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day. It is written in the prophets, And they shall be all taught of God. Every man therefore that hath heard, and hath learned of the Father, cometh unto me. Not that any man hath seen the Father, save he which is of God, he hath seen the Father. Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me hath everlasting life. I am that bread of life. Your fathers did eat manna in the wilderness, and are dead. This is the bread which cometh down from heaven, that a man may eat thereof, and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

**Text:**

From the Second Lesson: “The Jews then murmured at him, because he said, ‘I am the bread which came down from

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<sup>4</sup> *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xix (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 55:1-end (KJV).

<sup>6</sup> St. John 6:41-51 (KJV).

<sup>7</sup> St. John 6:41 (RSV).

Thomas asked Him to show them the way to God, Jesus said, “I am the way.” When Martha talked about the resurrection of the dead, Jesus replied, “I am the resurrection.” That makes people angry as well as confused.

The Church meets with a similar reaction when it presses its claims to be the Body of Christ on earth and the vehicle chosen by God to transmit the truth from one generation to another and to all the people on earth. We are considered arrogant, bigoted, and intolerant when we make those claims. We are called upon, as Jesus was, to justify ourselves by what we do, not by what we are or what we claim to be. But just as we cannot allow the world to define our mission for us, neither can we allow the world to define our essential nature for us. We are what God has made us and called us to be.

In sending His Son into the world, God gave the world much more than it expected or would accept. You, the Church, are also more than what the world expects or will accept. You are the Body of Christ, the chosen community of salvation, a colony of heaven on earth, the recipient and the transmitter of the grace and truth of God. You must be faithful to that calling as Jesus was faithful to His.

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St. Thomas Episcopal Church  
Orange, Virginia

August 13, 2006

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<sup>1</sup> “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).

<sup>2</sup> This sermon was originally written on the Gospel for Holy Communion according to Proper 14B, according to the Lectionary of the 1979 Book of Common Prayer.

heaven.”<sup>7</sup> In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

### Homily:

I’ve done some murmuring recently myself. There was rain all around us two months ago, but it seemed to be bypassing us. The trees were drying out. The grass was turning brown, the flowers and shrubs were suffering, and the crops were burning up. I prayed for rain, but I didn’t really want the kind of rain we got last month. I grumbled and complained and I told the Lord that these heavy downpours day after day were not really what I had in mind. I don’t think He cared about what I had in mind.

Now we’re back in a drought, and I still think he doesn’t care about my murmuring. God always gives us what we need, but that is not what we want. That’s when the murmuring starts.

When Moses led the people of Israel out of their state of slavery in Egypt, they began to murmur against him and complain about the conditions under which they were living. Freedom was not what they had expected it to be. They were hungry and they wanted to go back to Egypt.

Then God sent down from heaven a strange kind of bread, which they had never seen or tasted or heard of before. They called it “manna”, which means, “What is it?” The Bible does not tell us whether the people liked it or not. It does tell us that after a while they got tired of it. But the manna kept them alive. God did not give them what they wanted, but He gave them what they needed.

So it is in today’s Second Lesson. The people are disappointed and they murmur against Jesus. Ironically, this murmuring comes in the midst of a discussion on the manna epi-

sode. The murmuring against Jesus echoes the murmuring against Moses. Jesus likens Himself to the manna. He calls Himself the Bread of Life, which comes down from heaven. He is, however, much more than the manna ever was. The manna kept people alive on the physical level, but the life that Jesus gives is life eternal, because He shares His very own life with all who believe in Him.

That is not what the people wanted to hear. They wanted to hear about a Messiah who would be active politically and socially. They wanted real physical food, not spiritual food. They wanted the Roman occupation ended and the old Davidic monarchy restored. They wanted a social revolution where the rich would be taxed and their property given to the poor. They wanted the kind of things the Presiding Bishop-elect seems to want.

But Jesus offered no such program. So “The Jews then murmured at him, because he said, ‘I am the bread which came down from heaven.’” The people were offended at Jesus for two reasons. First, He defined His mission in the world differently than they defined it. Therefore, He did not meet their expectations.

Second, the people were offended by the outrageous claims that Jesus was making for Himself. They knew, or thought they knew, His origins and His background. They could not believe that someone so familiar to them, and especially one of such humble social standing and appearance, could possibly be Who Jesus claimed to be. “They said, ‘Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven?’”

The Church in our day faces similar complaints. People approach the Church with their own agendas and expect that the Church will help them fulfill their desires. Some seek a full range of services, such as day care for children, recreation for

youth, trips and other activities for senior citizens, support groups for people who are recently divorced or trying to lose weight or to kick the smoking habit. There is nothing wrong with such activities provided they grow out of the exercise of faith, but there is something definitely wrong when people think of themselves as customers or patrons and when churches scramble and compete to satisfy market demand.

There are some who define the mission of the Church in terms of bringing about social change. Some expect the Church to work directly in the political realm to promote worthy causes and worthy candidates. There are others who see the Church as a source of funds and publicity and volunteers for other non-profit agencies.

But the Church cannot define its mission by what the world expects. The Church must define its mission as Jesus defined His, by its own conviction of what the will of God requires. We must offer the world, not what it wants but what it needs, and if that means that the people murmur against us, so be it. We are in the best of company. The Jews murmured at Moses as well as at Jesus.

That brings me to the second reason that the Church in our day faces criticism similar to that which Jesus faced. It was not just what Jesus did or failed to do at which people took offense. People were even more offended by what He claimed to be.

Jesus, at least in John’s Gospel, is constantly taking questions and comments from the operative or functional level and responding on the ontological level.

When the people asked what they must do to be doing the work of God, Jesus replied that the work of God is to believe in Him. When the people asked him to give them the bread of life, he responded that He is the Bread of Life. When