

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER
The Fifth Sunday in Lent (Passion Sunday)¹

The Rev. Warren E. Shaw, Rector

Lessons:

The First Lesson:² Here beginneth the tenth Verse of the first Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.³

“Hear the word of the Lord, ye rulers of Sodom; give ear unto the law of our God, ye people of Gomorrah. To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me? saith [SETH] the Lord: I am full of the burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts; and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he goats. When ye come to appear before me, who hath required this at your hand, to tread my courts? Bring no more vain oblations; incense is an abomination unto me; the new moons and sabbaths, the calling of assemblies, I cannot away with; it is iniquity, even the solemn meeting. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth: they are a trouble unto me; I am weary to bear them. And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you: yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood. Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow. Come now, and let us reason together, saith [SETH] the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool. If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land: But if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson:⁴ Here beginneth the eleventh Verse of the ninth Chapter of the Epistle of the Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews.⁵

“Christ being come an high priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this building; neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us. For if the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh: how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? And for this cause he is the mediator of the new testament, that by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first testament, they which are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Homily:

The Second Lesson today was written to people who were familiar with Jewish rituals and customs. One such ritual that is referred to in the Lesson is the purification ritual for people who have come in contact with dead bodies.

Why do people who come in contact with dead bodies need to be purified? Well, for one thing there is a health issue. Corpses emit germs that can cause typhoid fever, tuberculosis, and various other diseases. That’s why we wash them, embalm them, mummify them, or burn them before they begin to rot. That’s also why priests in the Old Testament were careful to avoid them because the purification ritual, described in the Book of Numbers, took seven days, and during that time the contaminated man was not permitted to enter the Temple.⁶

But it is not just for hygienic reasons that dead things are to be avoided. In the Bible, from the very beginning, death is associated with sin. God tells Adam and Eve that the day they eat of the forbidden fruit is the day they become mortal. “The sting of death is sin,” says St. Paul. Without sin there would be no death.

The association between sin and death helps explain why Jesus says something that sounds cruel and harsh to man whose father had recently died. In Matthew 8 and again in Luke 9, Jesus calls a man to join the company of the Apostles. The man says, “First let me go and bury my father.” And Jesus replies, “Let the dead bury their own dead.”

The implication is that the whole world is doomed as the result of Adam’s sin. If we want to be part of the Kingdom of God, if we want to inherit eternal life, we cannot cling to the things that are associated with a dying world. To be part of God’s new creation, we have to let go of the old. We can’t do that completely of course. We are stuck in this world until we die, and as long as we are stuck in this world, we are stuck in the clutches of what we call “original sin.”

We can avoid contact with dead bodies, but we cannot avoid contact with a dying world. On the other hand we do not have to go running to it either. We can follow the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: “Do not lay up treasure in a world that is subject to corruption and decay. Lay up treasure in Heaven, where there is no corruption or decay.”

Jews are called, as we are called, to avoid sin and to cleanse themselves from it when they fall into it. The rites of purification serve to minimize contamination on a physical level among the Jews, but are unable to cleanse their souls. It took the shedding of the blood of Christ to do that. But even then, if we insist on clinging to cares and allures of this world, we remain contaminated by exposure to death.

The Christian rite of baptism is a purification ritual. It serves to allay the power of original sin and set us on the path to life. It incorporates us into the body of Christ, both in his death and in his resurrection. So let us not look back, like Lot's wife, on the doomed city from which we have been rescued.

The dead works that the passage refers to are not only sins, they are good works that have an effect only in the world that is passing away. They are dead because the world in which they have an effect is dead. St. Paul in I Corinthians talks about a few good things that are destined to pass away: prophecies shall fail, tongues shall cease, knowledge shall vanish. All that endure are faith, hope, and love. Those are the things we really need to focus on and cultivate.

Dead works are a burden on our conscience and tend to distract our attention from the things that really matter. They need to be purged in order to free us for the service of God. That is why we have Lent with its call to repentance and abstinence. That is why we have confession, both public and private. That is why we need forgiveness.

It is the blood of Christ that brings us that forgiveness. It is the blood of Christ that purges our conscience of the dead works that haunt us: "For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh; how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?"

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St. David's Anglican Catholic Church
Charlottesville, Virginia

March 17, 2013

¹ This sermon was originally written on the Epistle for Holy Communion on the Fifth Sunday in Lent, commonly called Passion Sunday, 2013.

² *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xx (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

³ Isaiah 1:10-20 (KJV).

⁴ "Upon any Sunday or Holy Day, the Minister may read the Epistle or the Gospel of the Day in place of the Second Lesson at Morning or Evening Prayer." *Concerning the Service of the Church*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER viii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

⁵ Hebrews 9:11-15 (KJV).

⁶ This is the reason that, in the parable of the Good Samaritan, the priest and the Levite "passed by on the other side".