

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER

Sexagesima Sunday¹

The Rev. Warren E. Shaw, Supply Priest²

Lessons:³

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the eighth Verse of the thirtieth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.⁴

“Now go, write it before them in a table, and note it in a book, that it may be for the time to come for ever and ever: That this is a rebellious people, lying children, children that will not hear the law of the LORD: Which say to the seers, See not; and to the prophets, Prophesy not unto us right things, speak unto us smooth things, prophesy deceits: Get you out of the way, turn aside out of the path, cause the Holy One of Israel to cease from before us. Wherefore thus saith the Holy One of Israel, Because ye despise this word, and trust in oppression and perverseness, and stay thereon: Therefore this iniquity shall be to you as a breach ready to fall, swelling out in a high wall, whose breaking cometh suddenly at an instant. And he shall break it as the breaking of the potter’s vessel that is broken in pieces; he shall not spare: so that there shall not be found in the bursting of it a sherd [SHARD] to take fire from the hearth, or to take water withal out of the pit. For thus saith the Lord GOD, the Holy One of Israel; In returning and rest shall ye be saved; in quietness and in confidence shall be your strength: and ye would not. But ye said, No; for we will flee upon horses; therefore shall ye flee: and, We will ride upon the swift; therefore shall they that pursue you be swift. One thousand shall flee at the rebuke of one; at the rebuke of five shall ye flee: till ye be left as a beacon upon the top of a mountain, and as an ensign on an hill.

“And therefore will the LORD wait, that he may be gracious unto you, and therefore will he be exalted, that he may have mercy upon you: for the LORD is a God of judgment: blessed are all they that wait for him. For the people shall dwell

in Zion at Jerusalem: thou shalt weep no more: he will be very gracious unto thee at the voice of thy cry; when he shall hear it, he will answer thee. And though the Lord give you the bread of adversity, and the water of affliction, yet shall not thy teachers be removed into a corner any more, but thine eyes shall see thy teachers: And thine ears shall hear a word behind thee, saying, This is the way, walk ye in it, when ye turn to the right hand, and when ye turn to the left.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the twenty-sixth Verse of the fourth Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Mark.⁵

“And he said, So is the kingdom of God, as if a man should cast seed into the ground; And should sleep, and rise night and day, and the seed should spring and grow up, he knoweth not how. For the earth bringeth forth fruit of herself; first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear. But when the fruit is brought forth, immediately he putteth in the sickle, because the harvest is come.

“And he said, Whereunto shall we liken the kingdom of God? or with what comparison shall we compare it? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when it is sown in the earth, is less than all the seeds that be in the earth: But when it is sown, it groweth up, and becometh greater than all herbs, and shooteth out great branches; so that the fowls of the air may lodge under the shadow of it. And with many such parables spake he the word unto them, as they were able to hear it. But without a parable spake he not unto them: and when they were alone, he expounded all things to his disciples.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

¹ This sermon was originally written on the Gospel for Holy Communion on the Third Sunday after Pentecost, according to the Revised Three-Year Common Lectionary, Year B, 2006.

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³ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xvi (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

⁴ Isaiah 30:8-21 (KJV).

⁵ St. Mark 4: 26-34 (KJV).

⁶ St. Mark 4:26-29.

Homily:

One of the interesting things about parables is their flexibility. Parables can be interpreted on different levels and adapted to different circumstances. The parables of Jesus have been legitimately used by Christian preachers in many different contexts to address various issues that the church has had to deal with from time to time.

If you ask several preachers what a particular parable means, you may well get several different answers, and they may all be legitimate. You may even get more than one answer if you just ask me, because I believe it is one of the beauties of this literary form that it can have more than one meaning.

With that in mind, let's look at one of the parables in this morning's Second Lesson, the parable of the seed that grows in secret.⁶ Jesus may have told this parable originally to support His claim that the climactic moment of history had arrived. God had planted a seed long ago, and for centuries while people were going about their business, going to bed and getting up day after day, that seed had been growing in ways that even Israel could not comprehend.

The prophets had predicted that one day that seed would blossom forth and produce a spectacular harvest. The claim of Jesus, and theme of His first recorded sermon, was that the time had come. The ancient prophecies were fulfilled in him. The kingdom of God was at hand. But soon after that proclamation, Jesus came under pressure by the Zealots to take some militant action against the Romans. Even John the Baptist became impatient with Jesus' apparent passivity. He sent messengers to ask Jesus if He was really the Messiah or not.

So the parable was also used to advocate patience. The kingdom of God breaks into history on God's schedule, not ours, and it is God, not us, who makes it happen. Thus it was that Jesus said to His mother at the wedding feast in Cana, "My

hour is not yet here.” And throughout the Gospels, Jesus is constantly telling His disciples, especially the Zealots, that His hour has not yet come. But when a group of Gentiles come seeking an audience with Him, He declares that the hour has come, and with that the Passion narrative begins.

Things move very quickly after that. Within a week of His jubilant welcome to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, Jesus is arrested, tried by the Jews, tried by the Romans crucified, buried, and raised from the dead. Within the next fifty days He gives the Apostles their final instructions, ascends to the right hand of the Father, and sends the Holy Spirit to guide and empower the Church.

Since the dawn of time, God has been directing history toward those critical days. Those days are the climax of history, and it is God, not man, who brought it about. But now it is our turn to act.

In the parable, the farmer does not do anything to make the seed grow. He just waits until it time for harvest. But then he springs into action, immediately, to use Mark’s favorite word, and begins to harvest the fruit of what God has been doing. The word that Mark uses gives us our English word “enthusiastic”. So the parable tells us it is time for us, like the farmer, to get busy and gather in with enthusiasm the fruits of what God has done.

Together we have the responsibility to tell the good news of what God has done in Christ and to gather in and baptize those who respond in faith. On the personal level, we who have accepted and rejoiced in the Gospel need to gather into our lives the fruits of it, which include holiness, courage, generosity, and all Christian virtues.

But there’s one more thing I would like to say about this parable before I stop. Like John the Baptist before him, Jesus also used the harvest image to depict a time of judgment. What

emerges from the ground is not only wheat and corn and other desirable crops, but also weeds and inedible stems and pods that need to be separated out and discarded. We associate that day of judgment with the end of the world.

There is a lot of speculation these days in certain religious circles about when that day of judgment will come. There are all kinds of schemes for trying to predict the end of the world. People associate parts of the book of Revelation and other apocalyptic writings with various events that occur in the news and claim to be able to follow the progress of what is happening beyond what we can see, underground as it were.

But the farmer in the parable was unconcerned about that, and Jesus specifically told us in another place that we were not to indulge in such speculation. The harvest will come when it comes, and there’s nothing we can do to hasten or to delay it. It is God’s doing and not ours. We are to go about our business like the farmer, rising and sleeping, watching and waiting, but not worrying. We don’t know what’s going in beneath the surface, but we are confident that something is going on and we have faith that God will bring it all to a proper conclusion at the proper time.

The climax of a drama is not the end. It is the point at which the end becomes inevitable. It is the pivotal point that determines what the outcome will be. We teach and believe that the climax of history occurred in the events of Holy Week and Easter. We’re still not sure exactly how everything is going to play out, but we are very sure that in the end, good will triumph over evil, right will prevail over wrong, truth will survive, falsehood will perish, and life will overcome death. Believe it. Count on it. But don’t try to figure it out.

We have work to do, but history is in the hands of God. Let us be content to leave it there.

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