

SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYER¹
Whitsunday, or Pentecost²

The Rev. Warren E. Shaw,³ Supply Priest

Lessons:⁴

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the eleventh Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.⁵

“And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots: And the spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD; And shall make him of quick understanding in the fear of the LORD: and he shall not judge after the sight of his eyes, neither reprove after the hearing of his ears: But with righteousness shall he judge the poor, and reprove with equity for the meek of the earth: and he shall smite the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips shall he slay the wicked. And righteousness shall be the girdle of his loins, and faithfulness the girdle of his reins. The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together: and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. And the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice’s den. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the fifty-third Verse of the sixth Chapter of the Gospel according to St. John.⁶

“... Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink

his blood, ye have no life in you. Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him. As the living Father hath sent me, and I live by the Father: so he that eateth me, even he shall live by me. This is that bread which came down from heaven: not as your fathers did eat manna, and are dead: he that eateth of this bread shall live for ever. These things said he in the synagogue, as he taught in Capernaum [*kuh-PURR-nay-um*]. Many therefore of his disciples, when they had heard this, said, This is an hard saying; who can hear it? When Jesus knew in himself that his disciples murmured at it, he said unto them, Doth this offend you? What and if ye shall see the Son of man ascend up where he was before? It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life. But there are some of you that believe not. For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were that believed not, and who should betray him. And he said, Therefore said I unto you, that no man can come unto me, except it were given unto him of my Father.

“From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him. Then said Jesus unto the twelve, Will ye also go away? Then Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Gospel: “*To whom shall we go?*” In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

So small groups of Christians are now gathering in counter-cultural cells for prayer, Bible study, and mutual support. New statements of faith are being formulated. Official pronouncements are being ignored as the emerging Church struggles to reclaim her own Christ-given agenda. And what is that agenda?

Jesus said, “*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.*” That’s our agenda. That’s our business.

And there’s just one more thing before I stop. A promise accompanies that order from our Lord, and the promise is this: “*I am with you always, to the close of the age.*”

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St. Thomas Episcopal Church
Orange, Virginia

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¹ “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).

² This sermon was originally written on the Gospel at Holy Communion for Proper 15B according to the lectionary of the 1979 Book of Common Prayer.

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⁴ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxv (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

⁵ Isaiah 11:1-9 (KJV).

⁶ St. John 6:53-69 (KJV).

So Peter has really phrased the question properly, and it is a rhetorical question. His question is not “*Where shall we go?*” but “*To whom shall we go?*” And he answers his own question when he continues, “*You have the words of eternal life.*”

The Protestant Reformers of the 16th century declared that the Church exists where the Gospel is truly preached and the Sacraments are duly administered. In other words, it is *what* happens, and not *where* it happens, that defines the true Church, and it is in that true Church that the real Christ is to be found.

And there we have it. If we are to be faithful, we must go where Jesus is. The real Jesus. Not the phony smiling anti-Christ who pats everyone on the head and tells them that God loves them just the way they are, but the strong demanding Master who confronts evil wherever He sees it, whether in the practices of powerful religious leaders, or in the systems and laws that oppress the poor, or in the deep recesses of the hearts of His followers. That Jesus is to be found wherever the Gospel is truly preached and the Sacraments are duly administered.

For too long, the denominations I have described—the old “mainline” Protestant bodies and The Episcopal Church under the old leadership structure--have preached whatever gospel the shifting tides of cultural fashion have called for. For too long, these churches have allowed the world to pose the questions and define the issues. The issues that are today tearing apart the Church are not issues that grow out of the faith tradition of the Church itself. The ordination of women, the ordination of gays, the use of inclusive language for God including alternative baptismal formulas and blessings, gay marriages, abortion rights—these are power issues brought into the Church by the late-20th Century emphasis on individual rights. They do not belong on the Church’s agenda.

Homily:

That is the question that confronts many people in “mainstream” Protestant denominations today, including those within The Episcopal Church. For various reasons, people are leaving the church. Sometimes those reasons are similar to the ones the people had in this morning’s Gospel.

It was fine when Jesus was going around healing people and telling great stories, arguing with the entrenched religious authorities, and welcoming people from the margins of society into His circle. But when He started talking about Himself as the bread of life, and the only way to the Father, and the giver of eternal life, that was more than some people were willing to buy into.

It is also more than many people today are willing to buy into, so when they hear such claims being made, they draw back. A church that preaches such a Gospel is too “narrow” and too “rigid” and too “fundamentalist” for them.

There are churches such people can find where they will not hear those claims. They will hear only about an inclusive love of God devoid of judgment and about a Jesus who seeks to enlist our help in righting all the wrongs of society. Usually, however, the people who are put off by the claims that Jesus makes for Himself, and the demands He makes on those who would follow him, simply do not go to church at all.

The problem, however, is that whenever you leave a place, you go to another place. Everybody has to be somewhere, and if you are not going to follow Jesus, you have to follow somebody else, even if that somebody is yourself and your own ideas about God and religion and morality. That’s what Joshua said to the people of Israel: “*If you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose whom you will serve.*” For many people, the choice is to serve themselves.

On the other side are those who accept the outrageous claims that Jesus makes. Those people want to go where His claims are honored and where others also believe them. That is one reason that so many faithful people are leaving long-established denominations, including The Episcopal Church. They are hearing a different Gospel, a strange Gospel that speaks only of acceptance and tolerance and says nothing of judgement and repentance and forgiveness and holiness and sacrifice. So they leave. But where do they go?

Some go to Rome. Some go to conservative Protestant churches. A few go to the ancient Orthodox Churches of the East, and some go to one of the so called “continuing Churches” that follow the Anglican way but are not under the jurisdiction of The Episcopal Church. All too many people, however, fall into the trap of thinking that can go nowhere. They stay home, or they go to the mall, or they go to some serene and scenic place in the great outdoors.

But that’s not really going nowhere. That’s going somewhere. You always have to go somewhere, even if that other place is your own living room. So the question remains for those who are unhappy on both sides of this great dispute: To whom shall we go?

Jesus said, “*I go to prepare a place for you.*” And that’s great, but most of us do not want to go to that place just yet. We need a place to go to and stay in the meantime.

There are people who are working to prepare places to go here on earth. New leadership is emerging in the Church. Networking is replacing vertical authority structures, and this networking is crossing denominational as well as geographic boundaries. Old institutional structures are passing away. New structures are being born that will be friendly to those who take seriously the claims and demands of our Lord. The death throes

of the old order mingle with the birth pangs of the new as old leadership struggles to retain its power. These are apocalyptic times.

But the new structures are not finished and the new Anglican churches that are springing up are few in number and hard to find. The independent churches require you to trade in your liturgy and your music and your sophisticated theology for simplistic music and messages full of emotion and lacking in depth.

You can always stay where you are of course, and I suspect that most of us will do that. There are many things that tie us to this place, and as long as we continue to hear the Apostolic faith preached from this pulpit and we can do that as long as we are caught up in the ancient liturgy of the Church, and as long as Jesus is presented as He presents Himself and not as many with less-than-robust faith present Him.

But I must caution you to be very careful not to confuse loyalty to Christ with loyalty to any particular place. The true heirs of Abraham’s faith must recognize that they, like him, are strangers and pilgrims with no permanent home in this world. Those who believe in the Ascension of the risen Christ must recognize that He is no longer confined to any particular place.

When the Jews became too attached to their glorious Temple, God took it away from them, sent them into a foreign land, and forced them to learn to worship Him there. When the Samaritan woman said to Jesus, “*Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, and you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people should worship,*” Jesus replied, “*The hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. . . . But the hour is coming and now is when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth, for such the Father seeks to worship him.*”