

SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYER¹
The Patronal Festival (of a Bishop)²

The Rev. Warren E. Shaw, Priest-in-Charge

Lessons:³

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the fifty-second Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.⁴

“Awake, awake; put on thy strength, O Zion; put on thy beautiful garments, O Jerusalem, the holy city: for henceforth there shall no more come into thee the uncircumcised and the unclean. Shake thyself from the dust; arise, and sit down, O Jerusalem: loose thyself from the bands of thy neck, O captive daughter of Zion. For thus saith [SETH] the LORD, Ye have sold yourselves for nought; and ye shall be redeemed without money. For thus saith [SETH] the Lord GOD, My people went down aforetime into Egypt to sojourn there; and the Assyrian oppressed them without cause. Now therefore, what have I here, saith [SETH] the LORD, that my people is taken away for nought? they that rule over them make them to howl, saith [SETH] the LORD; and my name continually every day is blasphemed. Therefore my people shall know my name: therefore they shall know in that day that I am he that doth speak: behold, it is I.

“How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace; that bringeth good tidings of good, that publisheth salvation; that saith [SETH] unto Zion, Thy God reigneth! Thy watchmen shall lift up the voice; with the voice together shall they sing: for they shall see eye to eye, when the LORD shall bring again Zion.

“Break forth into joy, sing together, ye waste places of Jerusalem: for the LORD hath comforted his people, he hath redeemed Jerusalem. The LORD hath made bare his holy arm in the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the nineteenth Verse of the twentieth Chapter of the Gospel according to St. John.⁵

“Then the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled for fear of the Jews, came Jesus and stood in the midst, and saith unto them, Peace be unto you. And when he had so said, he shewed [**SHOWD**] unto them his hands and his side. Then were the disciples glad, when they saw the Lord. Then said Jesus to them again, Peace be unto you: as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you. And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and saith [**SETH**] unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost: Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”⁶ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Homily:

Jesus spoke those words to the Apostles on Easter evening, and they have been repeated at ordinations ever since. The usual interpretation is that the Church confers on those who are ordained the authority of Jesus Himself to hear confessions and pronounce absolution in His Name.

I do not dispute that interpretation. As one to whom those words were spoken when the bishop laid his hands on me, I feel every day the weight of that awesome responsibility. This

morning, however, I would like to expand the established interpretation to make it more directly applicable to every one of you.

You may not have the authority to hear confessions or pronounce absolution in the Name of Jesus, but you do have the authority to forgive or retain sins in your own name. That is no small matter. The grace that you received in baptism and confirmation is nothing less than the incorporation of your life into the life of Christ. The Spirit conferred on you in those sacraments is the same Spirit that enabled Jesus to say from His Cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

You can say that too, and you should. If you pray for God to forgive those who have done you wrong, it will help you to forgive them as well.

To forgive the sins of someone does not simply mean to overlook them. It means to forget about them. Put them out of your life. Don't let them keep hurting you. If you hold on to the memory of what someone has done to you, if you nurse your grievance along, reliving the experience over and over, you will feel the pain over and over. That is what it means to retain sins.

I have seen many people who have retained the sins, real or imagined, of their siblings, or their parents or their teachers or their employers or their neighbors. They nurture and rehearse their grievances. They fantasize about revenge. And all the while they carry a burden of bitterness and anger that sucks up their energy and blinds them to blessings and opportunities that are all around them. All too often the end result has been depression, isolation, substance abuse, and even psychosis or suicide.

We have all had things done to us that have been hurtful, sometimes inadvertently and sometimes intentionally. People have betrayed our trust. People have maligned us. People have

cheated us. People have blamed us for their own shortcomings and have sought to punish us for their own feelings of guilt or inadequacy. There is nothing we can do that will change any of that. What is done is done. But we can decide what we are going to do about our grievances.

“If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” That is the choice we have.

Forgiveness is costly. Sin comes with a price and someone has to pay it.

I am convinced that what causes people to inflict pain on others is that they are trying to unload the pain they are unable to bear themselves. As Jesus said, “They know not what they do.”

If we can understand that, we can call upon the Spirit conferred on us by Christ Himself when the bishop laid hands on us to confirm us. That spirit is the Spirit of forgiveness.

Jesus paid the price for our sins and then threw them away. We should be willing to do that for others.

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St. David’s Anglican Catholic Church
Charlottesville, 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 for Mass on the First Sunday after Easter, 2012.

³ *Psalms and Lessons for Special Occasions* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xliii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

⁴ Isaiah 52:1-10 (KJV).

⁵ St. John 20:19-23 (KJV).

⁶ St. John 20:23 (KJV).