

Sermon for Morning Prayer: The Feast of St. Mark
by
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First Lesson: Isaiah 62: 6-12 (KJV).

“... I have set watchmen upon thy walls, O Jerusalem, which shall never hold their peace day nor night: ye that make mention of the LORD, keep not silence, And give him no rest, till he establish, and till he make Jerusalem a praise in the earth. The LORD hath sworn by his right hand, and by the arm of his strength, Surely I will no more give thy corn to be meat for thine enemies; and the sons of the stranger shall not drink thy wine, for the which thou has laboured: But they that have gathered it shall eat it, and praise the Lord; and they that have brought it together shall drink it in the courts of my holiness.

“Go through, go through the gates; prepare ye the way of the people; cast up, cast up the highway; gather out the stones; lift up a standard for the people. Behold, the LORD hath proclaimed unto the end of the world, Say ye to the daughter of Zion, Behold, thy salvation cometh; behold, his reward is with him, and his work before him. And they shall call them, The holy people, The redeemed of the LORD: and thou shalt be called, Sought out, A city not forsaken.”

Second Lesson: Romans 15:4-13 (KJV).

“... For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope. Now the God of patience and consolation grant you to be likeminded one toward another according to Christ Jesus: That ye may with one mind and one mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Wherefore receive ye one another, as Christ also received us to the glory of God. Now I say that Jesus Christ was a minister of the circumcision for the truth of God, to confirm the promises made unto the fathers: And that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy; as it is written, For this cause I will confess to

thee among the Gentiles, and sing unto thy name. And again he saith, Rejoice, ye Gentiles, with his people. And again, Praise the Lord, all ye Gentiles; and laud him, all ye people. And again, Esaias [ee-ZYE-uss] saith, There shall be a root of Jesse, and he that shall rise to reign over the Gentiles; in him shall the Gentiles trust. Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost.”

Text: “For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.” Romans 15:4 (RSV).

Body:

Many people think of Judaism and Christianity as separate religions. The first Christians did not think that way, and I am among those who do not think that way today. To my mind, and there are Jews who agree with me, the Christian faith and the Jewish faith are rival interpretations of a shared ancient religious tradition.

Actually there are rival interpretations of that ancient tradition within Judaism itself as well as within the Christian community. The Gospels, and the Old Testament itself, if you read it carefully, reveal that diverse interpretations of the common heritage have always been present and have often resulted in the formation of what amount to political parties vying for control of the institutional structure.

The resurrection of Jesus cuts across many of these divisions and resolves them into basically two camps: the Christians who believe it and the Jews who don't. But no matter whether you are an Orthodox Jew, a Conservative Jew, a Reformed Jew, a Protestant Christian, or a Catholic Christian, or any of the other subdivisions that have developed, you cannot get away from the common tradition that underlies all of them.

And what that means for us is what St. Paul says in the New Testament lesson: “Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.”

What the Apostle means by the scriptures is what Jesus referred to as “the Law and the Prophets” – the parts of the Old Testament that had gained canonical authority by the time of His ministry. I say “the portions” because there are some books in the Old Testament that gained canonical authority only later.

There was a Man named Marcion who tried to separate the Christian Faith from its Old Testament roots. He was quickly declared a heretic and his views were summarily rejected by the Church. And yet our liturgy for Holy Communion lacks any readings from the Old Testament, except for the few times when such a reading is substituted for the Epistle. The reason for that is that the writers of the Prayer Book assumed that Daily Morning Prayer, as it is properly called, would be read on Sundays as well on other days and that we would hear an Old Testament lesson and a Psalm from there before going on to the Eucharistic liturgy.

I sincerely hope to see that problem dealt with either by adding a Psalm and an Old Testament lesson to the communion service, as The Episcopal Church has done, or else by reading an abbreviated version of Morning Prayer immediately before the communion service, as the Prayer Book rubrics allow and direct. But for now, I will simply point out two reasons that this is an important matter.

“Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.”

What do we learn from the Law and the Prophets? One thing we learn is the true relationship between spirit and matter. The doctrine of creation with which the Bible begins, teaches us that the material world is the creation and servant of the spirit world. God is the primary reality, and God is spirit; matter is His creation and His servant.

That is very different from the relationship that is assumed in pagan religions and in most Eastern religions. There matter is seen as the enemy of spirit. Matter and spirit are ultimately incompatible in many of the world's religions, especially in the ancient world. They are not ultimately incompatible in the religion of the Bible. The material world, in Jewish and Christian theology is indeed fallen, but is redeemable and will ultimately be redeemed. The doctrine of the incarnation and the doctrine of the bodily resurrection depend upon that assumption. So does the concept of a sacrament in which material things convey the grace and, indeed, the very presence of God.

Closely related to that concept is the belief in personal God, a living God who loves the world that He has made. It is this God that governs the world -- not an impersonal principle of justice, a life force, or any other such cosmic abstraction. The God of Israel, the Father of Jesus Christ, is capable of suffering as well as judging. Even His judgments are tempered with mercy. This we learn, not from enlightened reason or transcendental meditation but from the Old Testament.

The people who came to the church from the pagan world in the first centuries were startled, even shocked by such notions. These beliefs and assumptions were so much in conflict with what had been taught by their poets, philosophers, and rulers. The barbarian people who came into the Church in later centuries were equally shocked. But once they had overcome their disbelief, they saw these fundamental concepts as good news, which is what the word "gospel" means.

Just as the pagans of ancient times needed to learn the foundational truths of the Old Testament before they could make sense of what the Christians were saying and doing, so the modern pagans among whom we live need to learn those same foundational truths about the relationship between spirit and matter and about the nature of the underlying power that holds the universe together. And we need to learn those truths ourselves if we are to appreciate the profoundly radical nature of our own faith and the freedom and hope and joy that it brings.

And so the apostle says, "Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope."

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