

SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYER¹
The Twentieth Sunday after Trinity

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

Lessons:²

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the second Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah.³

“Moreover the word of the LORD came to me, saying, Go and cry in the ears of Jerusalem, saying, Thus saith [SETH] the LORD; I remember thee, the kindness of thy youth, the love of thine espousals, when thou wentest after me in the wilderness, in a land that was not sown. Israel was holiness unto the LORD, and the firstfruits of his increase: all that devour him shall offend; evil shall come upon them, saith [SETH] the LORD. Hear ye the word of the LORD, O house of Jacob, and all the families of the house of Israel:

“Thus saith [SETH] the LORD, What iniquity have your fathers found in me, that they are gone far from me, and have walked after vanity, and are become vain? Neither said they, Where is the LORD that brought us up out of the land of Egypt, that led us through the wilderness, through a land of deserts and of pits, through a land of drought, and of the shadow of death, through a land that no man passed through, and where no man dwelt? And I brought you into a plentiful country, to eat the fruit thereof and the goodness thereof; but when ye entered, ye defiled my land, and made mine heritage an abomination. The priests said not, Where is the LORD? and they that handle the law knew me not: the pastors also transgressed against me, and the prophets prophesied by Baal [BAY-ull], and walked after things that do not profit.

“Wherefore I will yet plead with you, saith [SETH] the LORD, and with your children’s children will I plead. ... For my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the twenty-second Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Matthew.⁴

“And Jesus answered and spake unto them again by parables, and said, The kingdom of heaven is like unto a certain king, which made a marriage for his son, And sent forth his servants to call them that were bidden to the wedding: and they would not come. Again, he sent forth other servants, saying, Tell them which are bidden, Behold, I have prepared my dinner: my oxen and my fatlings are killed, and all things are ready: come unto the marriage. But they made light of it, and went their ways, one to his farm, another to his merchandise: And the remnant took his servants, and entreated them spitefully, and slew them. But when the king heard thereof, he was wroth: and he sent forth his armies, and destroyed those murderers, and burned up their city. Then saith **[SETH]** he to his servants, The wedding is ready, but they which were bidden were not worthy. Go ye therefore into the highways, and as many as ye shall find, bid to the marriage. So those servants went out into the highways, and gathered together all as many as they found, both bad and good: and the wedding was furnished with guests.

“And when the king came in to see the guests, he saw there a man which had not on a wedding garment: And he saith **[SETH]** unto him, Friend, how camest thou in hither not having a wedding garment? And he was speechless. Then said the king to the servants, Bind him hand and foot, and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness, there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. For many are called, but few are chosen.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Homily:

The first part of today’s gospel passage is not hard to understand. It’s a simple prophecy in the form of an allegory. The great feast is what the Jews would call “The Messianic Banquet” that ushers in the New Age, which is also known as The Kingdom

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

³ Jeremiah 2:1-9, 13 (KJV).

⁴ St. Matthew 22:1-14 (KJV).

⁵ THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

of God. Those who were originally invited are the Jews, God’s Chosen People. The servants sent to summon them to the feast are the prophets, who were either ignored or abused and sometimes killed. The strangers who were then called to the feast are the Gentiles. That’s all pretty obvious.

The prophecy of the armies who were sent to slaughter the inhabitants of Jerusalem and burn down the city was fulfilled in 70 A.D. when the Romans did exactly that.

The second part of this passage, about the man without a wedding garment, is a bit less obvious, and it is on those latter verses that I would like to focus. The man in question was invited, apparently without conditions, to attend a wedding reception, and then he was thrown out because he was not properly dressed.

On a quick reading, it would appear that he was treated unjustly. But you have to remember that this is part of an allegory, and the opening of the Kingdom to the Gentiles did, in fact have conditions attached. At the end of St. Matthew’s Gospel, in what is often called “the great commission”, Jesus instructed the Apostles, first to baptize the people in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, and then to teach them to observe all that Jesus had commanded. He did not simply say to bring in people as they are and leave them that way.

When the Apostles met to consider whether Gentiles needed to be circumcised, they decided they did not but they did need to obey the moral law. There are further conditions attached in Scripture to receiving Holy Communion. St. Paul tells the Corinthian church that if a man partakes of the consecrated bread and wine in an unworthy manner, “not discerning the Lord’s body”, as he puts it, that man eats and drinks not salvation but condemnation.

So, if we remember that the great feast is what we have come to call “The Marriage Feast of the Lamb” and that the Sacrament of Holy Communion is a precursor and foretaste of that banquet, we can see that what is sometimes called “the fencing of

the table” is of very early origin and not without Scriptural sanction.

The Church fathers all recognize this gospel passage as an allegory and treat the wedding garment not as an item of clothing but a symbol of the attitude with which one must approach the Lord’s table. That attitude is set forth explicitly in our Prayer Book: “Ye who do truly and earnestly repent you of your sins, and are in love and charity with your neighbors, and intend to lead a new life, ... draw near with faith....”

It goes without saying that you if you are truly repentant and intend to lead a new life, and if you have faith, you would, like the man in the story, have no answer if you were given an opportunity to explain why you have not been baptized. In the exhortation on page 87 the Prayer Book⁵ becomes even more specific about the necessary preparation. Let me read some of that to you:

“... [M]y duty is to exhort you ... to consider the dignity of that holy mystery, and the great peril of the unworthy receiving thereof; and so to search and examine your own consciences, and that not lightly... so that ye may come holy and clean to such a heavenly feast, in the marriage garment required by God in Holy Scripture... The way and means thereto is: first to examine your lives and conversations [that is, your ways of life] by the rule of God’s commandments; and whereinsoever ye shall perceive yourselves to have offended... confess yourselves to Almighty God with full purpose of amendment of life. And if ye shall perceive your offences to be such as are not only against God but also against your neighbors; then ye shall reconcile yourself unto them; being ready to make restitution and satisfaction to the uttermost of your powers... and being ready to forgive others who have offended you, as ye would have forgiveness of your offences at God’s hand.

“And... If there be any of you who by this means cannot quiet his own conscience... let him come to me or to some other minister of God’s word and open his grief.”

I might just add that the Canons of The Anglican Catholic Church require that you obtain permission from your own priest if you wish to make a confession to a different priest. I might also add that, since we consider Confirmation be the completion of Baptism, we also require that.

In laying out restrictions on access to the sacrament, we are often accused of being elitist and inhospitable. We believe, however, that we are actually protecting people from the judgement of God, because it is He who, like the king in the passage, will personally examine everyone who comes to His table. We also believe that we are acting in accordance with Holy Scripture, at least for the most part, as I have attempted to demonstrate.

The way you dress and groom yourself for any occasion is a reflection of the attitude with which you approach that occasion. If you wash yourself and comb your hair and wear the best clothing you have, you are showing respect for your host and for the others who are present. If you are careless about such things, you are showing that you do not really care about who is there or what you are doing. Your appearance reflects your attitude, that’s what this business of the wedding garment is all about. It’s the attitude that counts, and that is especially true when you are invited to the table of the Lord.

Let’s not be careless about that. Let’s remember Who it is that invites us to this table and what He expects of us when we appear before Him.

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