

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER
The Third Sunday after Trinity

The Reverend Warren E. Shaw, Priest Associate

Lessons:¹

First Lesson: Here beginneth the thirty-first Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah.²

“At the same time, saith [SETH] the LORD, will I be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be my people. Thus saith [SETH] the LORD, The people which were left of the sword found grace in the wilderness; even Israel, when I went to cause him to rest. The LORD hath appeared of old unto me, saying, Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee. Again I will build thee, and thou shalt be built, O virgin of Israel: thou shalt again be adorned with thy tabrets, and shalt go forth in the dances of them that make merry. Thou shalt yet plant vines upon the mountains of Samaria: the planters shall plant, and shall eat them as common things. For there shall be a day, that the watchmen upon the mount Ephraim [EFF-rah-eem] shall cry, Arise ye, and let us go up to Zion unto the LORD our God. For thus saith the LORD; Sing with gladness for Jacob, and shout among the chief of the nations: publish ye, praise ye, and say, O LORD, save thy people, the remnant of Israel. Behold, I will bring them from the north country, and gather them from the coasts of the earth, and with them the blind and the lame, the woman with child and her that travaileth with child together: a great company shall return thither. They shall come with weeping, and with supplications will I lead them: I will cause them to walk by the rivers of waters in a straight way, wherein they shall not stumble: for I am a father to Israel, and Ephraim [EFF-rah-eem] is my firstborn.

“Hear the word of the LORD, O ye nations, and declare it in the isles afar off, and say, He that scattered Israel will gather him, and keep him, as a shepherd doth his flock.

For the LORD hath redeemed Jacob, and ransomed him from the hand of him that was stronger than he. Therefore they shall come and sing in the height of Zion, and shall flow together to the goodness of the LORD, for wheat, and for wine, and for oil, and for the young of the flock and of the herd: and their soul shall be as a watered garden; and they shall not sorrow any more at all. Then shall the virgin rejoice in the dance, both young men and old together: for I will turn their mourning into joy, and will comfort them, and make them rejoice from their sorrow. And I will satiate the soul of the priests with fatness, and my people shall be satisfied with my goodness, saith [SETH] the LORD.”

Here endeth the First Lesson

Second Lesson: Here beginneth the ninth Verse of the ninth Chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew.³

“And as Jesus passed forth from thence, he saw a man, named Matthew, sitting at the receipt of custom: and he saith unto him, Follow me. And he arose, and followed him.

“And it came to pass, as Jesus sat at meat in the house, behold, many publicans and sinners came and sat down with him and his disciples. And when the Pharisees saw it, they said unto his disciples, Why eateth your Master with publicans and sinners? But when Jesus heard that, he said unto them, They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick. But go ye and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice: for I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

I'm not going to tell you that God will deliver our country from the current recession or the financial troubles to which our greed has led us. I'm not going to tell you that God will deliver us from militant Islam or from nuclear weapons in the hands of crazy people. But I am going to tell you what Jeremiah told the Jews in one of the darkest periods of their history. When we, as a country, come to our senses and return to the ways we inherited from those who built this country and defended it at great personal sacrifice, God will bless us once again with prosperity and peace.

This is what we learn from Jeremiah. This is the word of God: "I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you."

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St. David's Anglican Church
Charlottesville, Virginia

June 28, 2009

¹ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxvi (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

² Jeremiah 31:1-14 (KJV).

³ St. Matthew 9:9-13 (KJV).

⁴ Jeremiah 31:3 (RSV).

Text:

From the First Lesson: "I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you."⁴ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Homily:

Those words were spoken during one of the darkest periods of the history of Israel. The once-feared army had been reduced to little more than a palace guard. The king was a puppet ruler placed by the Babylonians, to whom the wealth of the country was exported. The priests and prophets were corrupt. There was worse to come.

Jeremiah rightly predicted that the magnificent temple built in the glory days of Solomon would one day lie in ruin, the priests and other leaders killed, the ordinary people carried off to Babylon, and the city of Jerusalem inhabited only by scavengers.

Nobody believed the Prophet. People usually don't believe their prophets. Nobody responded to Jeremiah's call for repentance to avert the coming disaster. Everyone thought, "It can't happen to us."

But it did happen, and it taught the Jews an expensive lesson. They learned that God's love for them did not shield them from the consequences of their behavior. They learned that some things they assumed would always be there would not always be there. They learned that the false gods with whom they were so enamored were not really gods at all but merely human inventions, helpless to deliver them from the jealous wrath of the God who loved them with an everlasting love.

The Jews had become like the prodigal son in our Lord's parable, squandering their spiritual inheritance, cultivating false friendships, and waking up one day, penniless and alone. But like the father in that parable, God continued to love them. He allowed His people to reap the results of their waywardness and waited anxiously for them to come to their senses. When they did, he once again lavished them with abundance. The Prophet Jeremiah predicted that, as well.

We don't usually think of the parable of the prodigal son as applying to the nation of Israel as a whole, but it does. It also applies to the United States.

In our country, there is a movement afoot to remove the words "In God we trust" from our money and from all public documents and buildings. I'm not sure how I feel about that because I think for a long time it has been a lie. For a long time, we have put our trust, not in God, but in the things God has given us. We are just now starting to realize that what we assumed would always be there, may not always be there.

The American dollar used to be the most stable currency in the world. It was as good as gold. It was welcomed and accepted everywhere and its purchasing power in foreign countries was greater than that of the local currency. We used to assume that it would always be that way, but it is not that way today.

We used to assume that American military power was invincible. We could defeat anyone, anywhere, any time. We could fight two wars at the same time and win them both decisively. No one would dare to challenge us. But eight years ago we were attacked and our citizens were killed on our own soil by an enemy we have yet to defeat.

We used to assume that our natural resources and financial resources were inexhaustible. Our farms could feed the world. Our factories could produce anything and our technology was state of the art. We used to assume that railroads would always make money, the stock market would always go up, and the automobile industry would always show a profit. But those things, which we once thought were written into the basic composition of the universe, have proven to be as unreliable as the false gods that Israel once turned to.

We used to think there was something in the American character, something inherent in our nature that makes us different from other people and able to do things that other people cannot do. We thought we were a people favored by God. And so we were. And so were the Jews. But they learned, as we are learning, that it is dangerous to presume upon the favor of God.

God's love is the kind of "tough love" that allows us to suffer when we make bad decisions. He respects our right to act out of self-will and self-indulgence and to live with the results of those actions. He suffers with us and gladly forgives us when we repent. That is how He loves us. But God does not reverse the law of cause and effect in the moral realm any more than He does in the physical realm. He heals what is broken but does not prevent it from breaking. To do so would be to introduce chaos once again.

We, like the Jews, cannot count on the permanence of our prosperity. We cannot count on our technology or our cleverness to deliver us from evil. We cannot count on the inherent goodness of our leaders or our people. There is only one thing we can always depend on—one thing that is built into the nature of reality. That one thing is that God has always loved us and always will. As St. Paul says, "If we are unfaithful, [God] remains faithful because he cannot go against his own nature."