
⁷ Cf. Articles XII, “Of Good Works”, and XIII, “Of Works before Justification”, *The Articles of Religion*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 605 (PE-CUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

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SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER The First Sunday in Lent

Lessons:¹

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the fifty-eighth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.²

“Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and shew my [SHOW] people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins. Yet they seek me daily, and delight to know my ways, as a nation that did righteousness, and forsook not the ordinance of their God: they ask of me the ordinances of justice; they take delight in approaching to God.

“Wherefore have we fasted, say they, and thou seest not? wherefore have we afflicted our soul, and thou takest no knowledge? Behold, in the day of your fast ye find pleasure, and exact all your labours. Behold, ye fast for strife and debate, and to smite with the fist of wickedness: ye shall not fast as ye do this day, to make your voice to be heard on high. Is it such a fast that I have chosen? a day for a man to afflict his soul? is it to bow down his head as a bulrush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? wilt thou call this a fast, and an acceptable day to the LORD? Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke? Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh?

“Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily: and thy righteousness shall go before thee; the glory of the LORD shall be thy reward³ [REAR-ee-ward]. Then shalt thou call, and the LORD shall answer; thou shalt cry, and he shall say, Here I am. If thou take away from the midst of thee the yoke, the putting forth of the finger, and speaking vanity; And if thou draw out thy soul to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul; then shall thy light rise

in obscurity, and thy darkness be as the noon day: And the LORD shall guide thee continually, and satisfy thy soul in drought, and make fat thy bones: and thou shalt be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not. And they that shall be of thee shall build the old waste places: thou shalt raise up the foundations of many generations; and thou shalt be called, The repairer of the breach, The restorer of paths to dwell in.

“If thou turn away thy foot from the sabbath, from doing thy pleasure on my holy day; and call the sabbath a delight, the holy of the LORD, honourable; and shalt honour him, not doing thine own ways, nor finding thine own pleasure, nor speaking thine own words: Then shalt thou delight thyself in the LORD; and I will cause thee to ride upon the high places of the earth, and feed thee with the heritage of Jacob thy father: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the sixth Chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew.⁴

“Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven. Therefore when thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth: That thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly.

“And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly. But when ye pray, use

forted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall possess the earth. Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for justice, for they shall be satisfied. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are they who suffer persecution for justice sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

If we do these things, then we will enjoy the mercy and glory of God, Isaiah says. If we do them, then we can live up to the full potential of our Lenten discipline, grow and learn from it, and be the people our Lord commands us to be. That is, or should be, the real goal of Lent. If we can let go of our sins, pride and vainglory for forty days, then we have a wonderful start on doing so the rest of the year as well.

Let us pray:

O Lord Jesus Christ, who for forty days fasted and prayed for us before beginning your earthly ministry, let your example inspire each of us to pray, to focus, and to live up to what You would have us do and be. Let us find joy in Lent, as we let go of less important things and truly live into Your word. Of Your mercy we pray. Amen.

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

² Isaiah 58:1-end (KJV).

³ The rearguard of an army on the march, the complement to the vanguard.

⁴ St. Matthew 6:1-18 (KJV).

⁵ Isaiah 58:4-8 (ASV).

⁶ St. Luke 18:9-14.

ciplines of Lent lead to life changes that support justice, truth, benevolence and holiness that our Lenten discipline is achieving its intended purpose.⁷ This is why, as we heard in the Second Lesson, Jesus warns, *“Take heed that ye do not your righteousness before men, to be seen of them: else ye have no reward with your Father who is in heaven.”*

And so with cheerful hearts and faces we should approach this opportunity to make change—to leave sin behind. Isaiah specifies what things we should be doing to observe Lent.

Fast with the intent to focus on the changes we need to make. Let this discipline and focus be followed by deeds of justice, of kindness and of charity. *“Loose the bands of wickedness,”* says Isaiah. Help free your fellow man from injustice. *“Undo the heavy burdens.”* Free the oppressed and promote justice.

“Let the oppressed go free.” Help to free those who life, or circumstance, or oppression has broken down. *“Break every yoke,”* he goes on. Free those captive not only in body, but in spirit.

And there is more:

“Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? When thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh?”

Feed the hungry. Take care of the poor and destitute. Clothe those that lack clothing. Be available to those in your own family who need you for support, for comfort, for life. These are the same goals later specified by Jesus Christ at the Sermon on the Mount:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they who mourn, for they shall be com-

not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking. Be not ye therefore like unto them: for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him. After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen. For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

“Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But thou, when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; That thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father which is in secret: and thy Father, which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the First Lesson:

“Behold, ye fast for strife and contention, and to smite with the fist of wickedness: ye fast not this day so as to make your voice to be heard on high. Is such the fast that I have chosen? The day for a man to afflict his soul? Is it to bow down his head as a rush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Wilt thou call this a fast, and an acceptable day to Jehovah? Is not this the fast that I have chosen: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the bands of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke? Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cov-

er him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh? Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thy healing shall spring forth speedily; and thy righteousness shall go before thee; the glory of Jehovah shall be thy rearward.”⁵

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Homily:

We tend to think of Lent as a time of fasting, and of depriving ourselves. We speak of “giving up something” for Lent, but Isaiah suggests we have that all wrong. Instead of focusing on what we are giving up, we should instead consider how we can be better by giving up something, namely sin.

The prophet warns that we too often spend our time trying to contrast and compare ourselves to others, trying to be better than they are. We congratulate ourselves for enduring the temporary inconvenience of fasting and prayer, while, like the Pharisee in the temple, who looked down on the publican,⁶ peering around to see if others are doing as much as we are. We gloat when we give something up, and secretly laugh when others fail in their intentions. Somewhere between the divisions, the comparing ourselves with others and the strife, we lose sight of the reason we observe Lent to begin with. In our very trying to be better than others, we make a mockery of the commands of God.

“Behold, ye fast for strife and debate,” says Isaiah. Instead of fasting to purify and focus ourselves, we do so to score points in devoutness. During the very time we should be laying aside our passions, we revel in them. Instead of devoting ourselves to Christ’s command to love one another, we spend time beating on each other, whether literally or metaphorically. We *“smite with the fist of wickedness,”* not opening our hearts to each other, but closing our hearts and exalting ourselves.

“Ye fast not this day so as to make your voice to be heard on high,” says Isaiah. Rather than acting as we have been directed by God, we act in a manner that God rejects. In doing so, we cut ourselves off from God. We don’t act in a way that God could possibly approve. As a parent does not wish to listen to the petulant whining of a self-congratulatory child, so God is not interested in our fasting while we clearly ignore His message.

So the prophet poses some questions for us to consider. Almost incredulously, he asks, *“Is such the fast that I have chosen? The day for a man to afflict his soul? Is it to bow down his head as a rush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Wilt thou call this a fast, and an acceptable day to Jehovah?”*

Do you really believe that this is the kind of worship that God demands? Do you really think God wants you to appoint only certain days to remember and atone for sins, and not rather to abstain from them the rest of the year? Shouldn’t we fast always from sin, not just for a few days?

The point of the fast is not to be uncomfortable, it is to give up sin and instead to do justice and charity. If we are to follow God’s command, isn’t it our appointed task to do justice and charity always? Rather than spending time in ceremony and symbols of grief and sorrow, Isaiah suggests, attempt instead to make each day acceptable to God.

Why spread sackcloth and ashes if you have no intent to change your life? By doing that, we are assuredly not fooling God: *“Wilt thou call this a fast, and an acceptable day to Jehovah?”*

If we follow God’s command, then we fast, we abstain, we deny self, in order to reflect on our faults and make permanent change in our lives. The pain of fasting is not the point. Self-denial is not meritorious in and of itself. It is when the dis-