

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER
The Fifth Sunday in Lent

Lessons:¹

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the tenth Verse of the first Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.²

“Hear the word of the LORD, ye rulers of Sodom; give ear unto the law of our God, ye people of Gomorrah. To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me? saith [SETH] the LORD: I am full of the burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts; and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he goats. When ye come to appear before me, who hath required this at your hand, to tread my courts? Bring no more vain oblations; incense is an abomination unto me; the new moons and sabbaths, the calling of assemblies, I cannot away with; it is iniquity, even the solemn meeting. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth: they are a trouble unto me; I am weary to bear them. And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you: yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood.

“Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow. Come now, and let us reason together, saith [SETH] the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool. If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land: But if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the twelfth Verse of the fourth Chapter of the First Epistle General of St. Peter.³

“Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ’s sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy. If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye; for the spirit of glory and of God resteth upon you: on their part he is evil spoken of, but on your part he is glorified. But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evildoer, or as a busybody in other men’s matters. Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf. For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God: and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God? And if the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear? Wherefore let them that suffer according to the will of God commit the keeping of their souls to him in well doing, as unto a faithful Creator.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Homily:

As our Lord Jesus Christ prepared Himself to turn towards Jerusalem for the final trials of His earthly life, He knew both the horror of His death and the Glory of the Resurrection that was to follow. As His followers, we will share in His fate.

Saint Peter undertakes to forewarn Christians of what will come, telling them, “*Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you....*” We know that the Church is persecuted, and that Christians face trials on a daily basis of both of the body and the spirit for their faith in Jesus Christ and in His Gospel.

Peter points out that the afflictions we face are not strange or uncommon, but are by the will of God. These trials

If we are saved only by the intercession of Christ, then what must become of those who reject Christ and His Gospel? We are the followers of Jesus Christ. We know the answer.

With absolute trust in our Lord, we turn with Him towards Jerusalem. We know what must come. We also know that the story does not end there—but that the Glorious Resurrection follows.

Let us pray:

Dear Lord, as we enter this season of Passiontide, grant to us the insight, honesty and courage to face squarely what is to come. Help us to see that the perils and punishments of service to You dwindle to nothingness alongside the glory of your Resurrection. Let us face those hardships with true joy in service to You. This we pray in Your Holy Name. Amen.

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

² Isaiah 1:10-20 (KJV).

³ 1 Peter 4:12-end (KJV).

⁴ Matthew 5:11 (KJV).

⁵ Thus one who steals an ox or sheep and kills it shall restore it four or five times over, Exodus 22:1 (KJV).

⁶ Matthew 26:39 (KJV).

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are common for the people of God, and our Lord Himself faced the same hatred, reproach and violence.

As He endured these troubles, so should we, and it should not seem odd to us that we do so, for it is by following the path of our Lord that we enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Indeed, the fiery trials we face do not destroy us, but only refine us in our devotion and purity, much as gold is refined in the fire to lose its dross and become purer. As gold becomes purer and therefore more precious as a result of the refining fire, our faith, devotion and love for God becomes ever more precious as it is purified in the trials of life.

This is why Peter says we should not despair or lose faith, but rather we should rejoice, as we are partakers in Christ's sufferings, and are made like unto Him. We suffer for His Name's sake, and in so doing, we become ever closer to Him.

Today we celebrate the Fifth Sunday in Lent, sometimes called Passion Sunday. Its season, Passiontide, is the two-week period before Easter, ending after Good Friday, during which our Lord turned his face to Jerusalem. He faced, without flinching, with hesitation, and without complaint, what He knew was coming, and what was coming was a lingering, horribly painful death.

After the initial adulation of the crowds there, their cheers quickly turned to jeers, and the palms which they initially strew in his path were replaced by the evil scourge and crown of thorns. He was falsely accused by leaders of the faith, then turned over to Roman overlords to face the agony of the Cross and death.

Yet, as we know, this was not the end. The grave did not end His journey; it only served as the starting place for our journey to spend eternity with the Father, for it was not just a place of repose for a defunct body but was the site of His ultimate victory over death and the glory of the Resurrection.

So, as we share in His victory and Resurrection, “*when his glory shall be revealed,*” we will be glorified with Him. And at that time “*ye may be glad also with exceeding joy.*” It is difficult for us to understand why this death and Resurrection were necessary. It is even harder to consider that we must take on the same approach to the world that our Lord did.

But Peter offers us this encouragement: “*If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye.*” Whether we are derided and mocked for being called by His Name, for believing in Him, and following His word and Gospel, we have been assured that we are blessed. “*Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake.*”⁴

Because, as Peter says, “*for the Spirit of glory, and of God, resteth upon you....*” In other words, while men may not understand or appreciate our following Christ, God does, and as He is full of grace and glory, He grants to us also that same spirit of grace and glory. This is because He is in-dwelling within us—living in us, as we live in Him.

One of the marks of a Christian is that while others ridicule, blaspheme and speak evil of God and of His creation, the Christian glorifies God and His creation. Christians do not suffer the ills of the murderer, as Peter says, nor of thieves, or evil-doers or what Peter calls “*as a busybody in other men’s matters.*” In the ancient Jewish law, the penalty for murder was death, while the thief was condemned to make a four- or five-fold restitution.⁵

Evildoers are those who break any of the moral laws of God or men. A “*busybody in other men’s matters*” is one who concerns himself with things with which he properly has nothing to do and thereby, most probably, neglects his own affairs.

Christians, St. Peter says, do not conduct themselves in these ways—and thus need not fear the punishments for these things. “*Yet if any man suffer as a Christian,*” he says, “*let him not be ashamed.*” Do not be ashamed of Christ, or of the Gospel, or of the name Christian, or of any punishment we might receive as a result of our Christian life and witness.

No matter how ignominious or shameful it might seem to be punished for being a Christian, always remember that Jesus Christ endured the Cross for our sakes. The one and only Son of God withstood the shame of taking on the sin of the whole world for our sakes—though He Himself was without sin. Our burdens surely seem to shrink to insignificance in comparison those He voluntarily assumed for us.

As we learn from Christ to accept those things which we may not wish to endure, we can be reminded of our Lord’s prayer at Gethsemane—“*Oh my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt.*”⁶ We should be particularly aware that it is not by our own efforts, or will, or any righteousness that we can claim to have earned, that we are saved, but only through Jesus Christ who saves us.

So let us, as Peter says, “*glorify God on this behalf....*” Let us take on the service to our Lord patiently, confidently and joyfully. Let us never forget that judgment will come—and that it starts with the people of God.

“*And if it first begin at us; what shall the end be of them that obey not the Gospel of God?*” Peter asks. If Christians stand first before God to answer for their failings, what can those who have failed to obey His word expect? The Old Testament is replete with examples of God’s wrath towards those who fail to listen to His commands.