

Lent 3

Morning Prayer A

First Lesson: Deut 6:1-9, 20-25

Second Lesson: 1 Cor 3

Homily

*"Shema Yishra-el,
Hear, O Israel:
The LORD our God is one LORD."*

These are the words said lovingly by an observant Jew in every important moment of life, in every prayer prayed, and (if it may be so) at the hour of death. These words are written on bits of parchment, worn in little boxes on the hand and the forehead, and nailed to the doorposts of their homes.

This is the God who revealed Himself to them, claimed them for His own, who led them out of slavery, and led them through their whole history. This is the God who revealed Himself to us, who, in His infinite love sent His Son for our redemption,

who delivered us from slavery to sin, who will lead us through this life, and into eternity.

This is the God of whom we are commanded:

"Thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might,"

words we hear in every Prayer Book Eucharist. We hear them, we repeat them, but we so seldom actually obey them.

There are so many things that get our attention, that distract us from the things of God, that steal our love from Him, capture our hearts and souls, and direct our energies to serve something else.

That is known as sin.

The words of Our God are to be heard, to be lived and to be taught, not only on Sundays and other religious occasions, not only in the church, but in our daily lives, every day, when we walk by the way, and when we lie down,

and when we rise up.,
in everything we do.

This is not a message for Lent alone,
but Lent is a time for taking inventory,
to see how our love for God
is being expressed -- or denied --
by the way that we live.

St. Paul carries this thought just a bit further,
in a way particularly appropriate to us Anglicans.
We like to pride ourselves on being
a bit more educated than others,
a bit more dignified.
As Catholic Christians we hold to
a deeper understanding of certain mysteries.
In many respects all of this is true.
We are Anglicans because we believe that to be so.

However,
we need to hear St. Paul's biting words,
and, each of us, to take them personally.

*I, brethren, could not speak unto you
as unto spiritual,
but as unto carnal,
even as unto babes in Christ.*

What is he saying to us?
Is he telling us, perhaps,
that all our 'extra knowledge'
all our theological and liturgical sophistication,
is not what it takes to make us good Christians?
He tells the Corinthians, and perhaps us,
that they are not ready for the deeper stuff.
Why? Because, where it really matters,
they just didn't get it,
and perhaps we don't either..

That church was badly divided.
There was constant bickering over who was right.
Everyone seemed to be more concerned
to have someone to oppose,
than to commit their lives to the Lord.
Have you noticed how much easier it is
to identify an enemy
than to face the enemy within ourselves?
We are so good at finding others to reject
that we forget to look inside.
We are, as Jesus said, so busy criticizing
the specks in another's eye,
that we don't notice the log in our own.

*"the wisdom of this world," continues the Apostle,
"is foolishness with God.
For it is written,*

*He taketh the wise in their own craftiness.
And again,
The Lord knoweth the thoughts of the wise,
that they are vain.
Therefore let no man glory in men."*

It's not who I am,
what I do,
how much I know,
that matters,
but that I am a sinner and I need help,
just as much as the one I'm squabbling with

*"Thou shalt love the LORD thy God
with all thine heart, and with all thy soul,
and with all thy might,"*

When we get that right,
then we know how to use the riches we have been
given,
and to share them.

Let us pray.

Let our eyes be upon thee, O Lord.
Let our hearts overflow with thy love.
Let our lives show thy presence.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Lent 3

Morning Prayer B

First Lesson: Zech 1:1-6, 12-17

Second Lesson: Mark 8:27-9:1

Homily

Psalm 107, various verses:

*"Such as sit in darkness,
and in the shadow of death ...
because they rebelled against the words of the Lord,
and lightly regarded the counsel
of the Most Highest ...
So ... they cried unto the Lord in their trouble,
and he delivered them from their distress. ...
O that men would therefore praise the Lord
for his goodness;
and declare the wonders that he doeth ...
Foolish men are plagued for their offense ...
they cried unto the Lord ...
he delivered ..."*

One of the most prominent themes
of the Old Testament Scriptures
is the cycle repeated several times in this Psalm.
It appears in several other Psalms,
is the central theme of the Book of Judges,

and shows up in the words of the Prophets,
over and over again,
in passages like our First Lesson.

God's people find themselves in serious trouble.
When they hit bottom, that's when they remember
God.

They cry out in pain.

God hears them and the pain is relieved.
Comfortable, they forget God,
and by their own foolishness fall again into trouble,
and, when they hit bottom ... (you get the idea.)

That's the way the history of Israel went.
That's the way the history of the Church has gone.
And that's the life-story
of each and every Christian.

The Hebrew nation knew the truth.
The Holy Church of God knows the truth.
You and I know the truth.
But sometimes,
well, sometimes it's like St. Peter's story.
He knew.

He had just made the most astounding statement
anyone in the history of the world had ever made,
"You are the Christ, the Messiah,
the Son of the Living God!"

We hear in another of the Gospels
that Jesus told him,
"You didn't hear this from men,
but from God Himself."

On the strength of this wonderful confession,
he was made leader of the Apostles,
and given powerful promises;
and immediately
he let his own idea of what would be good
blind him
to the Lord's talk of death and resurrection.
And then, as his Lord and Master was on trial,
he denied him.
He hit bottom, cried out in despair, and was heard.
On the day of Pentecost
he once again leads the infant church,
and in Antioch waffles again,
and seems to forget that the Gentiles too can be full
brothers,
and is strongly corrected by St. Paul.

He cries out to the Lord, and lives and dies
once again the leader of God's people,
giving his life in the boldness of martyrdom.

The Prophet Zechariah saw this happening,
he spoke the words of the Lord with fervor,
seeking to stop the downslide,

to interrupt the cycle,
to call the people back to righteousness,
as he spoke, he quoted the Lord as saying this:
"*my words and my statutes,*
which I commanded my servants the prophets,
did they not take hold of your fathers?
and they returned ..."

and, though they fell, they returned,
and returned again, and again,
and so do we.

That's what Lent is for,
to remind us of the Word of the Lord,
both of His displeasure at our sins,
and of His passionate call to return.
Every year it calls us to interrupt the cycle,
to stop our mad and headlong flight from God,
and to return to His mercy,
and His righteousness.

Let us pray.

Lord Jesus Christ,
in the darkness of this world thou didst come
to thy blessed mother's womb, to visit us;
in the night of thy betrayal
thou didst wash thy disciples' feet,

and didst give thyself to scorning and reproof;
and upon the Cross thou didst die for our sins.
Unworthy we pray thee, hear our prayer,
lighten our darkness, show us our sins,
and forgive us the evils we have done,
and lead us, by the power of thy Holy Spirit
ever nearer the fullness of thine everlasting image,
thou that livest and reignest with the Father
and the same Spirit, one God to ages everlasting.
Amen.

Lent 3

Evening Prayer A

First Lesson: Amos 5:4-15

Second Lesson: Gal 5:16-24

Homily

Fragments of what we heard from the Prophet Amos:

*"For thus saith the LORD unto the house of Israel,
Seek ye me, and ye shall live:
Seek the LORD, and ye shall live; ...
Seek good, and not evil, that ye may live:
and so the LORD, the God of hosts,
shall be with you, ...
Hate the evil, and love the good, ...
it may be that the LORD God of hosts
will be gracious ..."*

On the other hand he speaks of God's judgment on those who "seek Bethel" (the place where false gods were worshiped), and those who 'tread upon the poor.'

This stark contrast is a constant theme of the Old Testament Prophets.

It is important to renounce evil.

It is important to seek God and His ways -- not only important, but vital.

Life depends upon it.

Judgment hangs in the balance.

"But," you may say,

"That's the Old Testament.

Isn't that all just legalism?"

Well, hear the words of St. Paul the Apostle, the words he wrote to the Galatians, the words we read a few moments ago:

*"Walk in the spirit," he says,
"and you won't be ruled by the flesh,"*
and he goes on,
*"...IF ye be led of the Spirit,
ye are not under the law."*

That sounds almost like saying that sin is so easily forgiven that it hardly counts, doesn't it?

A lot of Christians take it that way, but listen on. St. Paul is not done.

He follows this immediately by a horrendous list. (some of the words in the King James are a little obscure, but the translation

in the Revised Standard is fair and clear)

"Now the works of the flesh are plain: immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like. ... those who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God."

"Shall not inherit," what horrible words.

Is there any one of us free of these things? Any of us, if we are honest, have to admit that we have sinned in many of those ways, that many of those attitudes are within us, and that we will sin again, and he says, "shall not inherit."

"Woe is me! Who shall deliver me?" says St. Paul in another place, and we, if we know the truth about ourselves, might well echo him.

But that's why Jesus died. That's why he stands insistently at the doors of our hearts,

knocking, knocking, knocking, calling, calling, calling, that's why He leads us through the waters of Baptism, that's why He feeds us with spiritual food.

If we call upon Him, pleading for forgiveness, He forgives. More than that, He pours His own Holy Spirit upon us. He begins a change within us, and the fruit of the Spirit grows until it blooms.

And *"... the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law. And they that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts."*

Let us pray.

Lord Jesus Christ,
in the darkness of this world thou didst come
to thy blessed mother's womb, to visit us;
in the night of thy betrayal
thou didst wash thy disciples' feet,

and didst give thyself to scorning and reproof;
and upon the Cross thou didst die for our sins.
Unworthy we pray thee, hear our prayer,
lighten our darkness, show us our sins,
and forgive us the evils we have done,
and lead us, by the power of thy Holy Spirit
ever nearer the fullness of thine everlasting image,
thou that livest and reignest with the Father
and the same Spirit, one God to ages everlasting.
Amen.

Lent 3

Evening Prayer B

First Lesson: Prov 4:7-18

Second Lesson: Luke 11:29-36

Homily

They were looking for signs and wonders.
What did that mean to them,
and how does it relate to us?

Sure, there were people looking for miracles,
for showy and surprising events,
for their own sake,
for the excitement of it.

There still are.

People like to be entertained,
and they like their God to entertain them.

But is there perhaps a deeper thought here?

Some of those people were educated people,
thoughtful people, inquiring people,

They knew the Scriptures,
they knew the promise of the Messiah,
they even wanted it all to be true,
but they demanded proof.

People still demand proof.

But God is God.

He is who He is.

He does not have to prove Himself to us,
and proof, indeed, as Our Lord said,
is not coming.

"This is an evil generation:" He said, *"they seek a sign;*

and there shall no sign be given it, ..."

no flashy miracles

(though He did quietly work miracles when love demanded),

no spectacular signs in the sky

(though a few had seen the star at His birth).

No, there would be no such powerful sign,
no such compelling proof,
as to bind the will of the unbeliever,
but instead

such signs as witness to His insistent call,
that whisper His unceasing invitation,
and thus there would be

"... the sign of Jonas the prophet."

And what is this mysterious sign?

Well, first of all it is found in the most striking part of his story.

Jonas (or Jonah) is well known as the prophet who spent three days in the belly of the whale (actually, Scripture says "a great fish")

and, by the power of God was saved from that fate,

and was seen and heard alive..
 So it was that Jesus was in His tomb three days
 and rose up from the dead,
 appearing many times to His disciples.
 "Surely here is proof!" we might say.
 To those who wished to believe, it certainly was,
 But it was to them that He appeared.
 He confirmed their faith.
 He didn't show Himself in the public square,
 for it is faith that He desires.

That is the central thought here,
 but perhaps there is more.
 Perhaps Lent may move us to look another direction.
 Jonah was reluctant to do
 what he knew God wanted.
 He was actually fleeing from God
 when the fish took him.

On his release he did set about to do God's will,
 but reluctantly, grumbling all the way,
 Jonah knew the will of God.
 At long last he was following it.
 He bore God's message to the people of Nineveh
 that, because of their sins,
 they would be destroyed.
 Like many religious people,
 like some of us, perhaps,

or, in some ways, like all of us,
 he was happiest when he could find
 someone to condemn for something.
 How often we define ourselves
 by what we are not!
 We know right and wrong
 (or at least we think we do),
 though we tend to concentrate
 on the parts that condemn someone else,
 and make us look better than they.
 Don't we often gloat, ever so righteously,
 when the sins of that other church
 seem to be catching up with them?
 Jonah knew God's judgment -- on others --
 but his words had an unexpected result.
 The people of Nineveh realized their sinfulness,
 and came to know the mercy of God.
 They repented. They changed.
 They were forgiven.
 And Jonah grumbled.

The truth of Christ is witnessed
 by His own resurrection,
 but also by the new life in Him
 of those who admit their sins,
 beg for forgiveness,
 and come to the Cross in hope and in trust.
 May that be our own experience this Lent,

and may it show in our lives,
not just in our words,
to lighten the way
for those whose hearts God is softening.

Let us pray.

Grant, we beseech thee, Almighty God, that the words which we have heard this day with our outward ears, may, through thy grace, be so grafted inwardly in our hearts, that they may bring forth in us the fruit of good living, to the honour and praise of thy Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.