

SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYERⁱ

Ash Wednesdayⁱⁱ

Lessons:ⁱⁱⁱ

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the third Chapter of Jonah.^{iv}

“And the word of the LORD came unto Jonah the second time, saying, Arise, go unto Nineveh, that great city, and preach unto it the preaching that I bid thee. So Jonah arose, and went unto Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceeding great city of three days’ journey. And Jonah began to enter into the city a day’s journey, and he cried, and said, Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown.

“So the people of Nineveh believed God, and proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest of them even to the least of them. For word came unto the king of Nineveh, and he arose from his throne, and he laid his robe from him, and covered him with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he caused it to be proclaimed and published through Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste any thing: let them not feed, nor drink water: But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily unto God: yea, let them turn every one from his evil way, and from the violence that is in their hands. Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger, that we perish not?

“And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil, that he had said that he would do unto them; and he did it not.

“But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was very angry. And he prayed unto the LORD, and said, I pray thee, O LORD, was not this my saying, when I was yet in my country? Therefore I fled before unto Tarshish [TAR-shish]: for I knew that thou art a gracious God, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repentest thee of the evil. Therefore now, O LORD, take, I beseech thee, my life from me; for it is better for me to die than to live.

“Then said the LORD, Doest thou well to be angry? So Jonah went out of the city, and sat on the east side of the city, and there made him a booth, and sat under it in the shadow, till he might see what would become of the city. And the LORD God prepared a gourd, and made it to

come up over Jonah, that it might be a shadow over his head, to deliver him from his grief. So Jonah was exceeding glad of the gourd. But God prepared a worm when the morning rose the next day, and it smote the gourd that it withered. And it came to pass, when the sun did arise, that God prepared a vehement east wind; and the sun beat upon the head of Jonah, that he fainted, and wished in himself to die, and said, It is better for me to die than to live. And God said to Jonah, Doest thou well to be angry for the gourd? And he said, I do well to be angry, even unto death. Then said the LORD, Thou hast had pity on the gourd, for the which thou hast not laboured, neither madest it grow; which came up in a night, and perished in a night: And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand^v persons that cannot discern between their right hand and their left hand; and also much cattle?"

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the eleventh Verse of the fifteenth Chapter of the Gospel according to St. Luke.^{vi}

"And he said, A certain man had two sons: And the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living. And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living. And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want. And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him. And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants. And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him. And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son. But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and

put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet: And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry: For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry. Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard musick and dancing. And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant. And he said unto him, Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound. And he was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and intreated him. And he answering said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends: But as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf. And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine.^{vii} It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Introduction:

Today’s Second Lesson comes at the end of a series of three well-known parables, in each of which our Lord uses the image of something lost: first a lost sheep, then a lost coin, and finally the lost son. In these parables, God, who actually has need of nothing, is depicted as suffering loss—the loss of one of His beloved creatures.

Theme:

To get a full understanding of these parables, we must consider what theologians call “God’s *Impassibility*”. “Impassibility” simply means “without passion” but in this context, “passion” does not mean “emotion”. Rather, it means “suffering”, in the same sense as we refer to Christ’s death on the Cross as “the Passion of Our Lord”, and is closely related to the adjective “impassive”.

Homily:

We have three characters in today's parable of the Prodigal Son, and the most important of them is the father. It is the love of this father that remains the most important lesson. He is shown in such a way as to give us the true picture of God's impassibility, because his love is constant, never destroyed, never diminished, always present. Because we think of love in strictly emotional terms, that is emotion with or without abiding commitment, we think of changes and reactions as part of what it must be. Not so the love of God. The father in the parable is patient, quick to forgive and completely gracious because nothing changes him.

When the prodigal returns to his father's house, he finds that the return itself is sufficient for him to receive forgiveness, because the father does not base his love on reaction, or on whims. If we believe that the love of God is based upon how He feels at the present moment, then we do not understand the Cross. The forgiveness of sins can be anticipated with hopeful expectation because Jesus Christ died for all of our sins, and "He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world."^{viii} If we understand that mercy or judgment depend on where we stand, because both were present on the Cross, then God's impassibility becomes a great comfort, and His love becomes our certain hope and expectation.

Another character is the elder brother, the one who does not know that he, too, is a sinner. Neither does he care that his bitterness grieves his father, because, after all, he is right. Right, that is, in that he is correct. If ever we forget that everything we do in Church is all about the Father's love for sinners (including ourselves), we become the elder brother. In every Holy Communion service we quote Saint Paul in the Comfortable Words: "*Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.*" The elder brother takes many forms, and that includes the forms he takes among people like ourselves. I have been present in services where people seemed more concerned with a performance than they were with worshiping God in spirit and in truth. Infinitely more important than getting all the details right, such as which candles to light first, is remembering why we are here to begin with.

Everything we hear from God's Word, and every sacrament we receive, is all because Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. The elder brother is not capable of obeying the words of Saint Paul, "*Do the work of an evangelist.*" He cannot do this work, because he is so very correct about how unworthy the younger brother is; he would never have sought for his lost brother. And, because of this, his heart is far from that of his father. He cannot make merry because joy depends upon love. And to understand his father, he would have to be filled with the love that forgives and restores.

Finally, we must consider the prodigal son himself. Anyone who cannot identify with this repentant sinner (as his elder brother was unable to do) wallows in self-deception because, as the Beloved Disciple wrote: "*If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.*"^{ix} In order to learn about sin, I did not really need a textbook in Seminary. All I ever needed was to look in the mirror. Like Count Dracula, some people do not look in the mirror, and could not see their reflections even if they did. What is the mirror but the word of God, the perfect Law of liberty that James tells us we *must* look into?^x The laver in which the priests cleansed themselves before entering the Holy Place was made of mirrors, all of which helped them to wash. Look into God's word, and let the truth convict you of your own sins.

When I teach people about Confession and Absolution, I tell them that they must remember that Christ is the Advocate for us but we appear before a priest (and *the* Priest Himself as well) to make confession as witnesses for the prosecution. Without excuses, without sugar-coating, we must testify against ourselves, and let the love of the Father come through to us by way of this sacrament of Absolution, a sacrament of Christ's own priesthood manifested through an ordained man. We must learn to identify with the prodigal son, to be able to say, "*I have sinned against heaven and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son.*"

“*Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet: and bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry: for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.*” And they began to be merry.” In other words, spoken through the priest, “Our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath left power to his Church to absolve all sinners who truly repent and believe in Him, of His great mercy forgive thee thine offences: And by His authority committed to me, I absolve thee from all thy sins, In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.” So too, with the General Confession and Absolution for “all who truly turn to him.”

Saint Paul tells us that we are all called to become saints.^{xi} What Saint Paul told the Christians in Corinth and Rome (and by extension to all Christians everywhere throughout time) was that they were called to become saints, because holiness of life is a vocation for every Christian.

But, unless we first identify with the prodigal son, we haven’t a snowflake’s chance in “the other place” of becoming saints. Thinking now about the elder brother more than the younger one; we must know (each one of us) that we are called to become saints; but seeing the terrible truth in the mirror of God’s word, we must be willing to appear for the prosecution in order to receive the grace of forgiveness. The joy of sin-forgiven creates charity; and this love, in turn, creates motivation to do the work of an evangelist.

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The Rev’d Robert Hart^{xii}
August 21, 2011

ⁱ “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).

ⁱⁱ This sermon was originally written on the Gospel for Mass on the Ninth Sunday after Trinity, 2011.

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

^{iv} *Jonah 3:1—4:end (KJV).*

^v *I.e., 6 x 20 x 1,000 = 120,000.*

^{vi} *St. Luke 15:11-end (KJV).*

^{vii} *Because the younger son had already received his inheritance by anticipation.*

^{viii} *I John 2:2 (KJV).*

^{ix} *I John 1:8-10 (KJV).*

^x *James 1:22-25.*

^{xi} *I Corinthians 1 and Romans 1.*

^{xii} *Rector, St. Benedict's Anglican Catholic Church, Chapel Hill, NC.*