

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER

The Ninth Sunday after Trinityⁱ

Lessons:ⁱⁱ

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the fourteenth Chapter of The Book of the Prophet Ezekiel.ⁱⁱⁱ

“Then came certain of the elders of Israel unto me, and sat before me. And the word of the Lord came unto me, saying, Son of Man, these men have set up their idols in their heart, and put the stumbling block of iniquity before their face: should I be enquired of at all by them? Therefore speak unto them, Thus saith the Lord God; Every man of the house of Israel that setteth up his idols in his heart, and putteth the stumblingblock of his iniquity before his face, and cometh to the prophet; I the Lord will answer him that cometh according to the multitude of his idols; That I may take the house of Israel in their own heart, because they are all estranged from me through their idols.

“Therefore say unto the house of Israel, Thus saith the Lord God; Repent, and turn *yourselves* from your idols; and turn away your faces from all your abominations. For every one of the house of Israel, or of the stranger that sojourneth in Israel, which separateth himself from me, and setteth up his idols in his heart, and putteth the stumblingblock of his iniquity before his face, and cometh to a prophet to inquire of him concerning me; I the Lord will answer him by myself: And I will set my face against that man, and will make him a sign and a proverb, and I will cut him off from the midst of my people; and ye shall know that I am the Lord. And if the prophet be deceived when he hath spoken a thing, I the Lord have deceived that prophet, and I will stretch out my hand upon him, and will destroy him from the midst of my people Israel. And they shall bear the punishment of their iniquity: the punishment of the prophet shall be even as the punishment of him that seeketh *unto him*; that the house of Israel may go no more astray from me, neither be polluted any more with all their transgressions; but that they may be my people, and I may be their God, saith the Lord God.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the fourth Chapter of the Epistle of the Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Thessalonians.^{iv}

“Furthermore then we beseech you, brethren, and exhort *you* by the Lord Jesus, that as ye have received of us how ye ought to walk and to please God, *so* ye would abound more and more. For ye know what commandments we Give you by the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, *even* your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication: That every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour; Not in the lust of concupiscence, even as the Gentiles which know not God: That no *man* go beyond and defraud his brother in *any* matter: because that the Lord *is* the avenger of all such, as we also have forewarned you and testified. For God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness. He therefore that despiseth, despiseth not man, but God, who hath also given unto us his holy Spirit. But as touching brotherly love ye need not that I write unto you: for ye yourselves are taught of God to love one another. And indeed ye do it toward all the brethren which are in all Macedonia: but we beseech you, brethren, that ye increase more and more; And that ye study to be quiet, and to do your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you; That ye may walk honestly toward them that are without, and *that* ye may have lack of nothing.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Homily:

The will of God, St. Paul tells us in today’s Second Lesson, is your sanctification. He repeats this, saying it a second time this way: “For God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness.” The will of God is treated by many like a problem, like a mathematical problem so complex in nature that it requires endless work and a thousand chalk boards. Others treat the will of God as a matter that requires special revelation about their own futures, a kind of direction either from his very mouth, or by dreams and visions or by signs.

Often this causes sincere Christians to behave much too much like unbelievers who commit the sin of going to fortune tellers (strictly forbidden in Scripture), being obsessed with answers about the future,

and very much for selfish motives. Still others treat the will of God as a matter to be neglected by its very nature, a complete mystery not to be solved. This last category is not unlike the common misreading of the prophet Isaiah, where a famous passage is often taken to mean the very opposite of what it truly says:

“Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith **[SETH]** the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts. For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater: So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it.”^v

In that text the prophet contrasts the ways and thoughts of the unrighteous and wicked with the ways and thoughts of God, too high for the wicked and unrighteous man to grasp. But God’s ways and thoughts come down from heaven like the rain and snow, coming down in the revelation of His word. Therefore, the wicked and unrighteous man can repent, and can learn to renew his mind.^{vi} The ways and thoughts of God that are revealed speak to the mind of man. So said the prophet Moses to the whole people of Israel: “The secret things belong unto the LORD our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law.”^{vii}

It may be comforting to treat the will of God only as those secret things of Providence, hidden mysteries beyond human thought. Indeed, more of God’s wisdom remains hidden to human view than what is seen. But the will of God does not belong exclusively in these categories: It is not a problem to work on endlessly, nor is it likely that most individuals will be guided in every decision of life by signs and dreams, nor is the will of God too lofty a subject for our consideration. For, as Moses and

Isaiah spoke long ago, it is the task of the believer to pay heed to what God has, in fact, revealed. And why? As Moses said, to do what God has commanded, and as Isaiah said, to repent, to abandon all wicked ways and unrighteous thoughts, so to learn God's ways and thoughts.

The Will of God – Saint You

Therefore, in that light we repeat what St. Paul wrote: “This is the will of God, even your sanctification...For God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness.” I want to quote two other passages by the Apostle that help clarify this even more. In the first chapter of his Epistle to the Romans he addressed the Christians there as “all that be in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints.”^{viii} He opened another Second Lesson in similar fashion: “Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours.”^{ix}

Whatever else the will of God may mean in your own life, this is clear: You are called to be a saint. That is what is meant by the words: “For I am the LORD that bringeth you up out of the land of Egypt, to be your God: ye shall therefore be holy, for I am holy.”^x The word “holy” is related to the words “sanctify,” “sanctification,” “santos” and “saint.” Since the will of God is your sanctification, the will of God is your sainthood.

Some people are sure that saints are not ordinary people at all, but special people like the comic book superheroes. They can leap tall buildings at a single bound: They came from Krypton, or were bitten by a radioactive spider. They have an advantage over regular people. Only a fool, they figure, thinks he can become a saint.

Others assume that Paul says that the Christians are all *called* saints because we have already arrived. But, the word “called” does not mean labeled, as in tagged and designated. A nominal sainthood, a merely titular sanctification, or even one somehow completely *imputed* by grace alone, is not his meaning. Rather, the word “called” appears, as in all those who are “called saints,” to speak of a *calling*. Whatever you do in life, all Christians have a common vocation to become saints.

Some of us have been called to the ordained ministry, and others have been called to various ministries in the Church as laity. But all of us who are baptized into Christ have been called to become saints.

Most of us began like the Gentile woman—sometimes called a “Syro-Phoenician woman”—who approached Our Lord to have her daughter freed from a devil.^{xi} That is, in purely numeric terms, most of us were born as Gentiles, which means that in addition to being born in sin we were also, in the words of St. Paul, “in time past Gentiles in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision by that which is called the Circumcision in the flesh made by hands; That at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world.”^{xii}

I do not see how the human condition can get any worse this side of Hell. If you believe that Paul was rough on the Gentiles, remember that in that account of the Lord’s healing of the Gentile woman’s daughter, Jesus the Lover of mankind, “all compassion, holy unbounded love” Himself, referred to Gentiles by the flattering title, “the dogs.” We need to pay attention carefully in order to learn the point that Jesus was making, and to understand we must learn some Biblical theology. So, we proceed.

Father Abraham

The story of this Gentile woman is related very much to the Second Lesson today, for in it we heard, “that every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honor; not in the lust of concupiscence, even as the Gentiles which know not God.” St. Paul makes the same distinction here that he made elsewhere when addressing converts to Christianity from among the Gentiles. “Ye know that ye were Gentiles, carried away unto these dumb idols, even as ye were led,”^{xiii} he writes to the Corinthians. In the passage I quoted earlier he began with the words, “remember, that ye being in time past Gentiles.”

Note the past tense in these words: “You were Gentiles...In time past Gentiles.” In the Epistle to the Ephesians Paul wrote: “But now in

Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ.... Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow-citizens with the saints, and of the household of God; And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit.”^{xiv}

Whatever ethnic pride you may have from whatever background, in Christ you are part of Israel. When my Celtic ancestors were painting themselves blue and offering human sacrifice, the Jews were worshiping the living God in His temple at Jerusalem. But, I say these things not only to condemn anti-Semitism (though I do point out that if you hate the Jews you have to hate Jesus Christ, and His mother and all the Apostles). I say these things to make you aware of how your sanctification begins. In that account of Our Lord and the Gentile woman we do not see the woman become angry or offended. Why not? She was just called, along with all her people, a dog.

She came for help because of what her daughter needed, and here this Jewish holy man ignored her at first, and when pressed seemed to respond with an insult. But she continued to press for his help, and in her persistence faith took the form of humility. Indeed, as all the virtues are related and finally summed up in charity, this woman’s faith was expressed by humility in that she continued to plead for His help: “And she said, Truth Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters’ table.” At this point the Lord turns to face her, and in so doing reveals His will for all the nations of mankind whom He had come to save from sin and death.

The Amen of Abraham

“Then Jesus answered and said unto her, O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt.”^{xv} This is why we need the Biblical theology I mentioned. What does faith, as mentioned by our Lord, indicate for us? Again, we turn to St. Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles.^{xvi} In the fourth chapter of his Epistle to the Church in Rome, the Apostle made a very important point about the faith of Abraham. First, that faith was counted to him for righteousness.^{xvii} This was

important to Paul, for in his conversion he learned that it is by faith that we receive salvation; that grace is something we cannot receive by the Law.

The importance of this faith is the essence both of his Epistle to the Romans and his Epistle to the Galatians. And he tells the Ephesians, “For by grace are ye saved through faith.”^{xviii} Now, in the fourth chapter of Romans, as I mentioned, Paul develops this teaching about faith, and reminds us that at the time that Abraham’s faith was counted to him, or to Abram as he was still named (God would change his name later to Abraham), he was not yet circumcised. The meaning of this is that the same faith that was counted to Abram for righteousness is the faith that also is counted as righteousness to all those who were in time past called Gentiles.

“And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised: that he might be the father of all them that believe, though they be not circumcised; that righteousness might be imputed unto them also: And the father of circumcision to them who are not of the circumcision only, but who also walk in the steps of that faith of our father Abraham, which he had being yet uncircumcised.”^{xix}

We are taught by Paul that the uncircumcised Abram, that is Abraham, is the father of all believers, even those who *were* Gentiles in times past. When our Lord says of the woman that “great is her faith,” He welcomes her into the family of Abraham, which is the household of God. So too, He welcomes you.

“He therefore that ministereth to you the Spirit, and worketh miracles among you, doeth he it by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Even as Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness. Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham. And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed. So then they which be of faith are blessed with faithful Abraham.”^{xx}

And, what is the faith that Abraham had? Look at the actual revelation he received from God:

“And, behold, the word of the LORD came unto him, saying, This [*i.e.* his servant] shall not be thine heir; but he that shall come forth out of thine own bowels shall be thine heir. And he brought him forth abroad, and said, Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them: and he said unto him, So shall thy seed be. And he believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness.”^{xxi}

If we look at this in light of all that would follow, we can say that Abraham believed the Gospel. How so? Because the promises made to Abraham were about the land his people would have, and about his seed. Immediately, that promise about his seed makes us think of Isaac. But once again it is Paul who takes it to its logical end: “Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ.”^{xxii}

The history that unfolded takes us from Isaac the son of Abraham to Mary the Virgin, centuries later. In all its history, God would neither scatter Israel nor allow them to be lost in idolatry. He did not allow them to be destroyed like so many other nations who were taken captive by powerful kings, but He let them suffer when they needed to be purified. “Salvation is of the Jews,”^{xxiii} said our Lord. So, the revelation given to Abraham was about more than simply the son that Sarah would bear. It was about the Son that Mary would bear.

The revelation given to Abraham was to unfold among the people of Israel in coming centuries, as it would be clarified by prophets, such as Jeremiah who told of the New Covenant that Christ spoke of, on the night in which he was betrayed, as the new Covenant in his own blood. It would be clarified by Isaiah who spoke of the Servant of the Lord, especially the Suffering Servant who would take away the sins of the whole world: “But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray;

we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.”^{xxiv}

The prophets foretold all, and so it came to pass. The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us,^{xxv} and He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil,^{xxvi} until the day came that He was crucified as the one true sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. And the words of the prophets were fulfilled again when He rose the third day from the dead, that is, the third day before any corruption could begin.^{xxvii}

The faith that Abraham had was belief that what God had revealed is true.

The word “believed” as it appears in the original in that verse, where we see that Abram *believed*, is a very interesting Hebrew word. You say that word quite often, usually at the end of prayers. People tell us it means, “so be it.” But it really means, very simply, “true.” That word is “amen.” The word *amen* is from the word *emet*, which means truth. What is the faith of Abraham; that faith that makes you a child of God, and that you need in order to begin to become a saint?

The extent to which Abraham would see is a mystery to us, and it is only partly unfolded by what Jesus said: “Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad.”^{xxviii} We know this, however: Abraham believed the truth fully to the extent that God *revealed* it to him. We see, on this side of salvation history, that God has revealed to the Church the fullness of the Gospel. It is given to us to know the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven.^{xxix} We have been given the revelation that Jesus Christ is God of God, light of Light, very God of very God, begotten not made.

We know that He is fully God and fully man, born of a Virgin. We know that He died to take away our sins and give us His righteousness, and rose to give us His own immortality. We were taught by the Risen Christ the true name of God: “The Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.”^{xxx}

In each of our worship services, whether Morning or Evening Prayer or Holy Communion, we say the words of one of the great Creeds of the Church and we affirm our belief in everything that God has revealed. Each of us says, “I believe.” In those Creeds we speak of the God who has called us to be holy as He is holy, and we speak of the great love He revealed in giving us salvation through His Son. We confess our faith in the Son Who is one with the Father as God, and one with us as a man begotten by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary.

You say “I believe” about His atoning death and victorious resurrection. We say “I believe in the Holy Spirit,” God in our very midst Who gives grace and makes us holy as we participate in the life He gives. We are children of Abraham, and when we say “Amen” it is our assent to the faith of Abraham. On this side of God’s revelation, we say the “Amen” of our father Abraham.

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ⁱ *This sermon was originally written on the Second Lesson for Mass on the Second Sunday in Lent, 2012.*

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

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ezekiel 14:1-11 (KJV).*

^{iv} *I Thessalonians 4:1-12 (KJV).*

^v *Isaiah 55:7-11 (KJV).*

^{vi} *Romans 12:1-2 (KJV).*

^{vii} *Deuteronomy 29:29 (KJV).*

^{viii} *Romans 1:7 (KJV).*

^{ix} *I Corinthians 1:2 (KJV).*

^x *Leviticus 11:45 (KJV).*

^{xi} *St. Matthew 15:21-28.*

^{xii} *Ephesians 2:12 (KJV).*

^{xiii} *I Corinthians 12:2 (KJV).*

^{xiv} *Ephesians 2:13, 19-20 (KJV).*

^{xv} *St. Matthew 15:28 (KJV).*

^{xvi} Not only does Paul use this as a personal title, but it is the clear meaning of the words spoken to him by Jesus Christ: “for I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and a witness both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in the which I will appear unto thee; Delivering thee from the people, and

from the Gentiles, unto whom now I send thee, To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me.” Acts 26:16-18 (KJV).

^{xvii} Genesis 15:6.

^{xviii} *See* Ephesians 2:8-12.

^{xix} Romans 4:11-12 (KJV).

^{xx} Galatians 3:5-9 (KJV).

^{xxi} Genesis 15:4-6 (KJV).

^{xxii} Galatians 3:16 (KJV).

^{xxiii} St. John 4:22 (KJV).

^{xxiv} Isaiah 53:5-6 (KJV).

^{xxv} St. John 1:14.

^{xxvi} Acts 10:38.

^{xxvii} Psalm 16:10.

^{xxviii} St. John 8:56 (KJV).

^{xxix} St. Matthew 13:11 (KJV).

^{xxx} St. Matthew 28:19 (KJV).