

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER

The First Sunday after the Epiphany¹

Lessons:²

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the twenty-second Verse of the eighth Chapter of the Book of Proverbs.³

“... The LORD possessed me in the beginning of his way, before his works of old. I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was. When there were no depths, I was brought forth; when there were no fountains abounding with water. Before the mountains were settled, before the hills was I brought forth: While as yet he had not made the earth, nor the fields, nor the highest part of the dust of the world. When he prepared the heavens, I was there: when he set a compass upon the face of the depth: When he established the clouds above: when he strengthened the fountains of the deep: When he gave to the sea his decree, that the waters should not pass his commandment: when he appointed the foundations of the earth: Then I was by him, as one brought up with him: and I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him; Rejoicing in the habitable part of his earth; and my delights were with the sons of men. Now therefore hearken unto me, O ye children: for blessed are they that keep my ways. Hear instruction, and be wise, and refuse it not. Blessed is the man that heareth me, watching daily at my gates, waiting at the posts of my doors. For whoso findeth me findeth life, and shall obtain favour of the LORD.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the ninth Verse of the first Chapter of the Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Colossians.⁴

“... For this cause we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to desire that ye might be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; That ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God; Strengthened with all might, according to his glorious power, unto all patience and longsuffering with

joyfulness; Giving thanks unto the Father, which hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light: Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son: In whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins: Who is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of every creature: For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him: And he is before all things, and by him all things consist. And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence. For it pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell; And, having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself; by him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven. And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled In the body of his flesh through death, to present you holy and unblameable and unreproveable in his sight: If ye continue in the faith grounded and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel, which ye have heard, and which was preached to every creature which is under heaven; whereof I Paul am made a minister; Who now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body's sake, which is the church: Whereof I am made a minister, according to the dispensation of God which is given to me for you, to fulfil the word of God; Even the mystery which hath been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest to his saints: To whom God would make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you, the hope of glory: Whom we preach, warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom; that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus: Whereunto I also labour, striving according to his working, which worketh in me mightily.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence.”⁵ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Homily:

In Heaven there is no income tax. There are no entitlement programs. There is no bureaucracy, red tape, or government regulation. There is no Congress or Parliament. Everything is decided by Christ, the King, Who alone who combines perfect strength with perfect wisdom, perfect justice with perfect mercy, perfect resolve with perfect graciousness. With a perfect King there is no need for democracy or parliamentary procedure. The Kingdom of God is an absolute and perfect monarchy, not an ideology, not a political party.

Ultimately we do not serve in a democracy or a republic, we serve a King: the King of kings, unto whom all authority has been given, in heaven and earth. In music, Charles-Marie Widor highlights this absolute authority of Christ in the opening of his sixth “organ symphony”. Gabriel Saint Sains does the same at the end of his second. Absolute authority, power in purity and the glory of divine majesty come thundering and crashing in, combined with absolute truth, magnanimity and graciousness.

The only thing in the world that is for every man and every creature is Christ. Christ is for everyman, for all creation. Not every one has every gift, privilege, attainment. Not everyone is a thinker, craftsman, athlete, artist, preacher, or businessman. But Christ is for everyone: Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, atheists, agnostics, everyone. All the laws of science are His laws. In Him all things cohere. The Gospel of the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, our King, has a transforming power which can bring wholeness to everyman, to every creature.

The least important town in Asia Minor was Colossae [*koe-LAHSS-eh*], and to that town St. Paul wrote his most exalted letter,

from which this morning's Epistle was taken. St. Paul was dealing with a heresy in Colossae [*koe*-LAHSS-eh] called Gnosticism [NOSS-tih-sizz-um]. Gnosticism [NOSS-tih-sizz-um] takes many forms, like cancer, but always has as its base a denial of the goodness of creation as God made it. There is in the Gnostic [NOSS-tick] view—a *gnosis* [KNOW-siss], a knowledge—a secret revelation, of the way things really ought to work. The Gnostic [NOSS-tick] elite have discovered the mechanism that explains history. Class, Race, Gender—the past hundred years have been like the First Century—rife with Gnosticism [NOSS-tih-sizz-um]: Communism, Nazism, feminism, the cults, New Age philosophy, Christian Science, Mormonism, the Moonies and Scientology. All these are forms of Gnosticism [NOSS-tih-sizz-um], and they are all totalitarian. Perhaps a third of the Church has been swept away in this Gnosticism [NOSS-tih-sizz-um]. The litmus test of Christian faith as opposed to any form of Gnosticism [NOSS-tih-sizz-um] is whether Jesus is proclaimed as God in the flesh, or not.

For the Gnostics [NOSS-ticks] of today, as in the First Century, Jesus is not God in the flesh. He is not totally adequate, unique, or supreme. He is not recognized as King, nor the agent of creation, nor its goal, nor as perfect man and perfect God, perfectly united in one Person. He can be nothing more than an ethical teacher. The Gospel is too simple and direct for the Gnostic [NOSS-tick]. Surely there is some higher knowledge, some new revelation or messiah, some new trinity consisting, perhaps, of Darwin, Marx and Freud. For the Gnostics [NOSS-ticks], Jesus is one of a series, one of many intermediaries. The Gnostics have a spiritual aristocracy: the higher revelations are for an elite, not for everyman. Our Liturgy is called the Book of Common Prayer because it is common to all, available to everyman. In God's Kingdom, everyman has full access to the throne. The humblest peasant can grasp the profoundest mysteries of the Faith.

Gnosticism does not know God as personal love. The highest moral absolute is not personal love but power. "Break the glass ceiling." Assert yourself over all life that gets in your way. Gnostic [NOSS-tick] spirituality is wrapped up in self-fulfillment. Christian spirituality is all about giving yourself away, growing in your capacity to love God and

neighbor. So St. Paul writes to the Colossians, to warn every man, to teach every man in all wisdom, to present every man perfect in Jesus Christ. The Gospel is simple and direct. Jesus is the complete, final, all-sufficient, total revelation of God. This is the loftiest possible view of Christ. As someone once said, “no greater claims were ever made, and no greater claims could be made.” All this is set forth in the Epistle to the Colossians to prevent the shipwreck of Asian Christianity.

Jesus, our King, is totally adequate for every man, in all ages, in all places. He is unique. He is able to save to the uttermost. He is able to keep you from falling. He is able to sympathize with your weakness. He is able to strengthen you, and cleanse you, and fill you with the peace that passes all understanding. He is the Truth, and He sends the Holy Spirit, who unites us with Him, to take us to the Father.

By His Resurrection He has conquered every enemy and every opposing power. Nothing in life or death can ever bind or hold Him. He is Lord of all, King of Kings and Lord of Lords, preeminent in all things. His Kingdom has already come in power. We manifest the mystery of His Kingdom when we assemble for the Eucharist, the Sacrament of the Kingdom.

Here we see the miracle of splintered, shattered human nature reunited in the divine-human unity of Jesus Christ. Here we see the gathering and lifting of creation instead of a falling into sin and death. The ceremonies, the vestments, the music, the Liturgy, all point to the glory of the Church as the new creation and the joy, truth and beauty of the new life. Everything here pre-figures heaven, with the King robed in majesty. Here, in the Holy Spirit, we return and ascend to Christ our King. We ascend to His table in His Kingdom, where we have fellowship with our heavenly Father in the glory of the new creation, wrought by the lifting up of our King on His Throne, the Cross, and by His Resurrection from the dead, and His further lifting up: His enthronement, His ascension. In the Eucharist, we ascend with Him and enter into the light, joy and triumph of our risen King.

Three times in our Liturgy we use the words “Divine Majesty”: in the Prayer for the Church, in the General Confession, and in the Eucharistic Prayer. What thrilling words: “Divine Majesty!” We are with His Divine Majesty in Heaven, made His royal children by adoption and grace. We are part of the Kingship of all believers; we are a royal priesthood in Him, to offer everything in our lives as a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving to the Father. First and foremost in this, leading the human race as its figurehead, is our Blessed Mother, Mother of Believers, the Queen of Heaven, the first of our race to be crowned.

We can hardly wait to see our Lord and Feast on the vision of His Face. Until then He is increasing our capacity for joy and for surprise and wonder. He wants us to know that He is the backbone of all happiness.

We are to pray fervently that those who do not know this will find it out. Multitudes today are living in such a flatness, a staleness, an emptiness. There was in London an office worker from Tokyo, a 23 year old woman with the initials Y.K. Should she get married? Should she go all out for a career? She senses that her destiny is different from what she is paid to do eight hours a day. So what is my destiny, she asks. Make myself the achiever? Concentrate all my will power and energy to be an achiever? Y.K. feels tired and battered just thinking about this. So she lives from day to day. She skis in the winter. She plays tennis in the summer. She plans a holiday in the States, or perhaps Germany. On weekends she goes to not-quite-satisfactory parties with not-quite-satisfactory dates, and reads less than she wants to. The thought gnaws deeply within her, “I can’t live like this much longer!” She is vulnerable at this point either to a cult or to the Gospel.

How many are saying this right now: “I can’t live like this any longer!” Evangelism is one hungry man telling another where to find bread.

Meanwhile the dancing and feasting have begun. There is an invitation to the King’s marriage supper. Shouts of praise are raised everywhere. All creation is standing on tip-toe to see the sons of God coming

into their own. Heaven and earth and all creation are gathered together in Christ our King, to celebrate the victory of the Lamb. He has restored everything in creation, all life, as a means of communion with the Father. Everything now—everything without exception—every person—every circumstance—can now be an invitation to love, to sacrifice, to suffer, to partake of the divine life. All the doors are open; the doors to the homeland of the heart's desire are open to all; we have boldness of access to the Father's throne of grace.

Father Alexander Schmemmann⁶ used to say that here before this Altar is the presence and gift of the goal, the Kingdom for which God created the world—the Kingdom of the Father's love of the Son, and the Son's love of the Father, and the Holy Spirit's gift of this love for the faithful. Here is the divine Majesty of infinite self-giving love.

Christ our King is totally adequate, unique, supreme, for all ages, all nations, all men, all creatures, all creation. By Him all things were made, and in Him all things are restored, and to Him all glory belongs. Amen.

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¹ *This sermon was originally written on the Epistle for Mass on the Feast of Christ the King, 2011.*

² *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*

³ *Proverbs 8:22-35 (KJV).*

⁴ *Colossians 1:9-end (KJV).*

⁵ *Colossians 1:18 (KJV).*

⁶ *A great Eastern Orthodox theologian of the 20th Century.*

⁷ *Bishop Ordinary, the Diocese of the Holy Cross; Rector, the Cathedral Church of the Epiphany, Columbia, SC.*