

Sermon for Morning Prayer The Second Sunday after Christmas

Lessons:ⁱ

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the forty-fourth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.ⁱⁱ

“Yet now hear, O Jacob my servant; and Israel, whom I have chosen: Thus saith the Lord that made thee, and formed thee from the womb, which will help thee; Fear not, O Jacob, my servant; and thou, Jesurun [*Jheh-SHUH-runn* or *JHESH-urr-unn*], whom I have chosen. For I will pour water upon him that is thirsty, and floods upon the dry ground: I will pour my spirit upon thy seed, and my blessing upon thine offspring: And they shall spring up as among the grass, as willows by the water courses. One shall say, I am the LORD’s; and another shall call himself by the name of Jacob; and another shall subscribe with his hand unto the LORD, and surname himself by the name of Israel. Thus saith the LORD the King of Israel, and his redeemer the LORD of hosts; I am the first, and I am the last; and beside me there is no God. And who, as I, shall call, and shall declare it, and set it in order for me, since I appointed the ancient people? and the things that are coming, and shall come, let them shew unto them. Fear ye not, neither be afraid: have not I told thee from that time, and have declared it? ye are even my witnesses. Is there a God beside me? yea, there is no God; I know not any.

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“Remember these, O Jacob and Israel; for thou art my servant: I have formed thee; thou art my servant: O Israel, thou shalt not be forgotten of me. I have blotted out, as a thick cloud, thy transgressions, and, as a cloud, thy sins: return unto me; for I have redeemed thee. Sing, O ye heavens; for the LORD hath done it: shout, ye lower parts of the earth: break forth into singing, ye mountains, O forest, and every tree therein: for the LORD hath redeemed Jacob, and glorified himself in Israel.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the sixth Verse of the second Chapter of the Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Colossians.ⁱⁱⁱ

“... As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him: Rooted and built up in him, and stablished in the faith, as ye have been taught, abounding therein with thanksgiving. Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ. For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power: In whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ: Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead. And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses; Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross; And having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a shew of them openly, triumphing over them in it. Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days: Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.”^{iv}

In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Introduction:

To make my point a bit more forcefully, I am going to repeat my chosen text from today’s Second Lesson, only I will use a more

contemporary, and I hope clearer, translation: “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.”^v

Sadly, we live in a time when we in the Church are inundated with “shallow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.” Even more sadly, these mischievous principles are offered to us by senior figures in – it is no longer accurate to call them “leaders” of – what were once solid, mainstream religious denominations.

Now, however, all too many of them have abandoned their various bodies’ original commitment to revelation as the prime source of truth and their long-standing adherence to traditional norms of Biblical interpretation. Instead, these deviant “leaders” have adopted and are propagating principles drawn not from revelation or even from the Church’s two millennia of lived experience but rather from current – and inevitably short-lived – academic fads and socio-political programs.

Theme:

In our great-grandparents’ time, those who professed the academic disciplines of theology acknowledged the central principle that the Christian Faith can only be studied from the perspective of those who profess that Faith. Thus, for example, it was recognized that the Holy Scriptures must be studied from the viewpoint of the Church within which, and for which, those Scriptures were written and transmitted.

Today, however, that organizing principle is no longer acknowledged in the trendy portions of academia. Instead, what now passes for theology is used to undercut and diminish the authority and credibility of the Christian Faith, not to explain and support it. This is, of course, in line with the entire current cast of academic prejudice, which strongly denigrates faith and religion and strongly propagates secular, materialistic, and deterministic alternative beliefs.

Development:

- 1. The New Testament accounts of those who encountered Jesus during His earthly ministry, and who almost involuntarily became His followers, show us that ultimately individual men and women come to know Jesus Christ, and therefore to accept the Christian Faith, as the result of experience of Him and of the difference He makes in individual lives, not on the basis of any abstract theories.**

In the following words, St. Paul expressly reminds the Colossians that the Christian Faith is rooted in the Christian life and experience: “So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.”^{vi}

It is this grounding in Christianity as a lived experience rather than as an abstract theory that protects us against the dangers of unfettered, and fruitless, speculation for the sake of speculation: “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.”^{vii}

- 2. The change that we experienced when we put on Christ was not merely the transfer of our personal allegiance from one social group or faction to another, but was an *ontological* change, that is, a fundamental change in the very basis of our being.**

This is what St. Paul meant when he told the Colossians:

“For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority. In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.

“When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave

us all our sins, having canceled the written^{viii} code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.”^{ix}

The key here is that Christ has transformed the essence of mankind’s covenant with God from a physical one, symbolized by the highly visible removal of a small and easily-dispensed piece of the body, into a spiritual one, symbolized by a rite of immersion^x which makes no perceptible change whatever in the outward body. In this new redaction of the covenant, what God demands of us is not so much that we conform to certain ritual practices as that we conform our overall lives and conduct to the standards one would expect of Godly people who wish to please the God Who has made the ultimate sacrifice for them:

“Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ.”^{xi}

Conclusion:

These are two of the prime principles that secular and pseudo-religious philosophers would have modern Christians abandon. We have said that Christianity is in large measure a matter of combined personal and community experience. The deconstructionists wish to downplay or, better, banish this experiential understanding of Christianity because powerful experiences are not easily explained away by abstract theorizing.

Thus one of the most prevalent attacks on this aspect of Christianity is to claim that the relevant experiences are purely personal, and hence are subject to infinite chance variations, and to deny that they are also communal. This denial of the general experience of the Christian body would, if it were to be accepted as legitimate, eliminate an important check and balance on individual exuberance and error.

Similarly, those who would deconstruct religion into vapid irrelevance vehemently controvert Christianity's claims to make real, albeit spiritual, changes in the persons and beings of its followers. Spiritual changes, such as the Catholic Faith says are made by the Sacraments it administers, are referable only to the God who initiates those Sacraments. As such, these changes are beyond the control of the secularists and so the validity and reality of those Sacraments must be denied. According to the deconstructionists, what the Catholic Faith calls "Sacraments" are mere symbolic observances, akin to Hindu ablutions in the River Ganges or the repetitive recitation of Buddhist mantras.

As Christians, however, we hold fast to the truth that such merely symbolic devotional practices, however comforting they may be to those who use them, in the words of today's Second Lesson "are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ."^{xii}

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

ⁱⁱ *Isaiah 44: 1-8, 21-23 (KJV).*

ⁱⁱⁱ *Colossians 2: 6-17 (KJV).*

^{iv} *Colossians 2: 8 (KJV).*

^v *Ibid. (NIV).*

^{vi} *Colossians 2: 6-7 (NIV).*

^{vii} *Colossians 2: 8 (NIV).*

^{viii} *I.e., Mosaic, as Deuteronomic.*

^{ix} *Colossians 2: 9-15 (NIV).*

^x *E.g., the Sacrament of Baptism.*

^{xi} *Colossians 2: 16-17 (NIV).*

^{xii} *Colossians 2: 17 (NIV).*

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