

Sermon for Morning Prayer
The First Sunday after Easter
(“Low Sunday”)

I. Lessons:ⁱ

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

“But now thus saith the LORD that created thee, O Jacob, and he that formed thee, O Israel, Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine. When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee. For I am the LORD thy God, the Holy One of Israel, thy Saviour: I gave Egypt for thy ransom, Ethiopia and Seba for thee. Since thou wast precious in my sight, thou hast been honourable, and I have loved thee: therefore will I give men for thee, and people for thy life. Fear not: for I am with thee: I will bring thy seed from the east, and gather thee from the west; I will say to the north, Give up; and to the south, Keep not back: bring my sons from far, and my daughters from the ends of the earth; Even every one that is called by my name: for I have created him for my glory, I have formed him; yea, I have made him.

“Bring forth the blind people that have eyes, and the deaf that have ears. Let all the nations be gathered together, and let the people be assembled: who among them can declare this, and shew [SHOW] us former things? let them bring forth their witnesses, that they may be justified: or let them hear, and say, It is truth. Ye are my witnesses, saith the LORD, and my servant whom I have chosen: that ye may know and believe me, and understand that I am he: before me there was no God formed, neither shall there be after me. I, even I, am the LORD; and beside me there is no saviour. I have declared, and have saved, and I have shewed, when there was no strange god among you: therefore ye are my witnesses, saith the LORD, that I am God.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

B. The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the thirty-sixth Verse of the twenty-fourth Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Luke.ⁱⁱⁱ

“And as they thus spake, Jesus himself stood in the midst of them, and saith unto them, Peace be unto you. But they were terrified and affrighted, and supposed that they had seen a spirit. And he said unto them, Why are ye troubled? and why do thoughts arise in your hearts? Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself: handle me, and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have. And when he had thus spoken, he shewed [SHOWD] them his hands and his feet. And while they yet believed not for joy, and wondered, he said unto them, Have ye here any meat? And they gave him a piece of a broiled fish, and of an honeycomb. And he took it, and did eat before them. And he said unto them, These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me. Then opened he their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures, And said unto them, Thus it is written, and thus it behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day: And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. And ye are witnesses of these things.

“And, behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you: but tarry ye in the city of Jerusalem, until ye be endued with power from on high.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

II. Text:

From the Second Lesson: “And ye are witnesses of these things.”^{iv} In the Name of the Father, and of the ☩ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

III. Introduction:

All too many people approach Christianity as if it were merely an intellectual proposition, rather like the postulates of Euclid’s *Geometry*. That is, they treat the facts of the Judeo-Christian story as remote statements that require only a passive acceptance, not an active engagement.

This approach, however, is completely in error. Scripture is many things but one thing it is not is a textbook of theoretical philosophical or theological

formulations. Rather, Scripture is written primarily as *story*, as a series of accounts of God's personal initiatives in the world and of the actions of His people in response to those initiatives.

While philosophy and theology are very important for understanding our Faith, in terms of chronology they came both after the events by which God revealed to us Himself and His purposes and after the accounts of those events were written down.

IV. Development:

In other words, philosophy and theology came about as the result of reflection upon the facts, events, and people who are recorded in the Biblical accounts. One of the principles we see illustrated by the actions in those accounts is that God's people are called, among other things, to be *witnesses* to Him and to His activities.

A. Throughout the history of God's dealings with humanity, He has called men and women to be witnesses to Him and to His mighty actions on our behalves.

The Old Testament is the record of God's salvific dealings with mankind and in numerous places it clearly states that God's people are called to give testimony by witnessing to the world His gracious mercy toward and care for us. Just one example is this ringing call from First Chronicles, written as part of the history of God's liberation of the Jews from their captivity in Babylon: "Give thanks unto the LORD, call upon his name, make known his deeds among the people. Sing unto him, sing psalms unto him, talk ye of all his wondrous works."^v

Among those Psalms we are thus commanded to sing, we find this statement: "They shall speak of the glory of thy kingdom, and talk of thy power; To make known to the sons of men his mighty acts, and the glorious majesty of his kingdom."^{vi}

Thus the greatest of the Old Testament prophets who foretold the coming of the Messiah instructed his hearers: "Ye are my witnesses, saith the LORD, and my servant whom I have chosen: that ye may know and believe me, and understand that I am he...."^{vii}

B. Our Lord Jesus Christ chose His Apostles and disciples to be witnesses to His salvific activity on our behalves.

The Gospels tell us of a number of occasions on which Our Lord called specific people to be witnesses to Him and to His work. Typical of these was the man whom He freed from demonic possession by directing his controlling spirit to depart into the Gadarene swine: “Jesus ... saith unto him, Go home to thy friends, and tell them how great things the Lord hath done for thee, and hath had compassion on thee.”^{viii}

More generally, St. Luke reports Our Lord’s saying to His followers, “And ye are witnesses of these things”^{ix} and St. John says very similarly, “And ye also shall bear witness, because ye have been with me from the beginning.”^x

This is no light matter. Jesus warned us that this function, of our testifying to the world on His behalf, is intimately bound up with our own hopes for salvation: our acceptance into the fellowship of God the Father depends upon it. Thus Christ told His followers, “Whosoever shall confess me before men, him shall the Son of man also confess before the angels of God: But he that denieth me before men shall be denied before the angels of God.”^{xi}

C. Our Lord Jesus Christ charged His Apostles, and therefore their successors, and therefore us, to be witnesses to the world of His way, of His truth, and of His life.

Just prior to Jesus’ Ascension, He announced to His Apostles and disciples that they would shortly be imbued with a special infusion of the Holy Spirit. The effect of that infusion, He said, would be to empower them to become witnesses to Him throughout the world: “[Y]e shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses to me both in Jerusalem, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost parts of the earth.”^{xii}

Those same Apostles and disciples certainly understood what He was commanding them to do. This was shown by the way they confronted the situation in which they were left with the betrayal and death of Judas Iscariot. Wishing to make up their company to the mystical number of twelve, thus symbolizing the Twelve Tribes of Israel, or the entire Hebrew people, they considered the express qualifications an Apostle ought to meet.

For the purpose of selecting candidates for the Apostolic Office, St. Peter summarized these qualifications as follows: “Wherefore of these men which have companied with us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, Beginning from the baptism of John unto that same day that he was taken up from us, must one be ordained *to be a witness with us of his resurrection.*”^{xiii} On this basis, from among the original disciples two such eyewitnesses were nominated, Joseph Barsabas Justus and Matthias.

That Apostolic understanding of the commandment to witness was further demonstrated just a few days later, when they fulfilled His precise words by witnessing to Him in Jerusalem – on the day of Pentecost, when St. Peter preached to the crowd, regaling it with reminders of the Old Testament prophecies of the coming of the Messiah and how the story of Our Lord’s life, condemnation, and death neatly fulfilled all those prophecies.

V. Conclusion:

However, if Our Lord has called us to be witnesses to Him – as, indeed, He has – that presents us with a problem. Unless we are prepared to confess that we have made no attempt to comply with His express command, we must take some pains to fulfill His wishes in this regard. That, unfortunately, requires us to undertake some self-examination and honest assessment.

So we must each of us ask ourselves, Are we actually serving as witnesses to Him? Do we tell all the people we possibly can about what Our Lord has done for them, to show them God’s unfathomable love for them and to assure them of ultimate salvation? Have our words, but even more our lives, testified to the reality of His sacrifice for us and the victory over sin that sacrifice has made possible?

Remember what St. Paul told his correspondents in the Church in Rome: “[I]f *thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus*, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.”^{xiv}

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The Rev’d Canon John A. Hollister
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ⁱ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*

ⁱⁱ *Isaiah 43: 1-12 (KJV).*

ⁱⁱⁱ *St. Luke 24: 36-49 (KJV).*

^{iv} *St. Luke 24: 48 (KJV).*

^v *I Chronicles 16: 8-9 (KJV).*

^{vi} *Psalms 145: 11-12 (KJV). Cf., Psalms 9: 11; 18:49; 26: 6-7; 119: 27 & 172.*

^{vii} *Isaiah 43: 10 (KJV).*

^{viii} *St. Mark 5: 19 (KJV); cf. St. Luke 8: 39.*

^{ix} *St. Luke 24: 48 (KJV).*

^x *St. John 15: 27 (KJV).*

^{xi} *St. Luke 12: 8-9 (KJV); cf. St. Matthew 10:32-33.*

^{xii} *Acts 1: 8 (KJV).*

^{xiii} *Acts 1: 21-22 (KJV) (emphasis supplied).*

^{xiv} *Romans 10: 9-10 (KJV).*