

Sermon for Morning Prayer The Second Sunday after Easter

Lessons:ⁱ

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the fortieth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.ⁱⁱ

“Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the LORD’s hand double for all her sins.

“The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it. The voice said, Cry. And he said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field: The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the spirit of the LORD bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever.

“O Zion, that bringest good tidings, get thee up into the high mountain; O Jerusalem, that bringest good tidings, lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid; say unto the cities of Judah, Behold your God! Behold, the Lord GOD will come with strong hand, and his arm shall rule for him: behold, his reward is with him, and his work before him. He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the tenth Chapter of the Gospel According to St. John.ⁱⁱⁱ

“Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that entereth not by the door into the sheepfold, but climbeth up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber. But he that entereth in by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the porter openeth; and the sheep hear his voice: and he calleth his own sheep by name, and leadeth them out. And when he putteth forth his own sheep, he goeth before them, and the sheep follow him: for they know his voice. And a stranger will they not follow, but will flee from him: for they know not the voice of strangers. This parable spake Jesus unto them: but they understood not what things they were which he spake unto them. Then said Jesus unto them again, Verily, verily, I say unto you, I am the door of the sheep. All that ever came before me are thieves and robbers: but the sheep did not hear them. I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture. The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the First Lesson: “The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever.”^{iv} In the Name of the Father, and of the ☩ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Introduction and Theme:

I have been writing this series of sermons for lay readers for almost a year now. Over that time, I have, of course, had to review, week by week, the alternative sets of Lessons that are appointed for each Sunday’s Morning Prayer in the 1943 Lectionary.^v But the process of writing sermons on these Lessons has meant these reviews have had to be in rather greater depth than the process of merely reading one set of those Lessons to comply with the clergy’s obligation to say the Daily Offices.

In the course of examining all these Lessons to determine what themes for sermons they present, I have been struck by how many of

them seem to raise, and to return to, the issues of *false prophets and teachers* and of *false prophecies and teachings* and to the related concepts of *true doctrine* and *true teachings*. But perhaps that should not be surprising after all: the editors of the Lectionary sixty-six years ago were surely aware that the Church and its members have always been beset by those who purvey false doctrines and influences.

Development:

In fact, in every time and every place where the Church seems to be succeeding in its mission to reach, convert, and teach the world, it is immediately attacked by the Father of Lies. Indeed, the intensity of the persecution of the Church, both political and philosophical, may be an approximate gauge of its health and progress.

Thus it is important regularly to remind ourselves of the power of truth or, in the words of my text today, that “but the word of our God shall stand for ever.”^{vi}

Indeed, in 1942 and 1943, when this Lectionary was finalized and approved, the United States and its allies were in the middle of a desperately-fought World War. That war had, in very large measure, been brought about by three different streams or bodies of false social, political, historical, and ethical teaching. The first of these massive complexes of falsehood to make itself felt on the international scene was Japanese militarism, which justified itself by a depraved form of the pagan faith, Shintoism, and which opened what eventually became the World War by attacking Chinese Manchuria in 1931, fully ten years before Pearl Harbor.

The second of these concatenations of lies to appear as an international threat was German and Italian Fascism, which in 1936 took the opening steps toward the European and African involvements in World War II, first with Italy’s unprovoked invasion of Abyssinia or Ethiopia and then with Italy and Germany’s intervention in the Spanish Civil War.

The third of the great conspiracies of lies was that of Soviet and Chinese Marxism-Leninism. The Soviet arm of this movement entered the Spanish Civil War at the same time as, but on the opposite side to, the Italians and Germans and the Chinese arm began desultory operations against the Japanese occupiers in 1937, still two years before the German invasion of Poland that is conventionally regarded as the opening of World War II in Europe.

All three of these movements were, at bottom, intensely hostile to real religion and especially to the Christian Church. Thus while these world events may not have had a direct or conscious influence on the redactors of our Lectionary, they were certainly major factors in the *ethos* or intellectual culture of the times.

All three of the conspiracies of lies to which I previously referred to, that is, Japanese militarism, Italo-German Fascism, and Soviet-Sino Marxism, share some marked characteristics. One of the principal ones is their utter disregard for the value of the human person. Each of these horrendous systems of evil, each of which was responsible for tens of millions of deaths, taught that an individual human being was merely a piece of raw material for the corporatist state, a mere cog in a vast political, social, and economic machine.

This teaching is the very antithesis of the Christian view of the individual. Christianity teaches that each individual man, woman, and child has infinite value because each person, of whatever class, status, or degree of wealth or education, is a child of God. Because each person is equally the creation of God, each person is loved equally by God and thus each ranks equally with every other person in importance and in the degree of consideration to which he or she is entitled.

It is for this reason that Our Lord taught us that, as we are reminded in every celebration of the Eucharist in “the Summary of the Law”:

“Here what our Lord Jesus Christ saith.

“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it; Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”^{vii}

Conclusion:

That “first and great commandment” and its corollary, “the second [that] is like unto it”, are vital parts of “the word of our God [that] shall stand for ever.”^{viii} We must always be wary of any suggestion that would reduce the individual child of God to a mere “human resource”, a piece of raw material for some program, or a mere unit in some overall central plan.

These institutionalist impulses are always presented under the guise of “the common good”. We are told that we must all contribute, we must all sacrifice, we must all give up something, but when these contributions are not voluntary, when we are compelled to make sacrifices but do not choose to do so, when our means are taken from us with the excuse of someone else’s higher wisdom, we must be suspicious. God wants the poor to be fed, the sick to be healed, and the troubled comforted, but His chosen agents for those worthy tasks are not political parties, are not social movements, are not abstract philosophies.

God wants individuals of faith and good will to reach out to their fellows in love, in a love that is an inadequate but nevertheless real response to God’s unimaginable love for us. God wants us to care for His people because they *are* His people, because they are loved by Him, not because they are the clients of some political leader or the constituents of some political party or the adherents of some currently fashionable philosophy.

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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 40: 1-11 (KJV).*

ⁱⁱⁱ *St. John 10: 1-10 (KJV).*

^{iv} *Isaiah 40: 8 (KJV).*

^v *While in 1928 the PECUSA adopted the edition of THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER that we use, in 1943 it adopted certain further revisions to that edition. Among these was a new table of Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year, for the first time setting forth “appointed Psalms” for Morning and Evening Prayer and altering the readings to be used at those Offices.*

^{vi} *Isaiah 40: 8b (KJV).*

^{vii} *The Order for The Administration of the Lord’s Supper or Holy Communion, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 69 (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943). Cf., St. Matthew 22:35-40.*

^{viii} *Isaiah 40: 8b (KJV).*