

Sermon for Morning Prayer The Second Sunday after the Epiphany

Lessons:

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the eighth Chapter of Zechariah.

“Again the word of the Lord of hosts came to me, saying, Thus saith the Lord of hosts; I was jealous for Zion with great jealousy, and I was jealous for her with great fury. Thus saith the Lord; I am returned unto Zion, and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem: and Jerusalem shall be called a city of truth; and the mountain of the Lord of hosts the holy mountain. Thus saith the Lord of hosts; There shall yet old men and old women dwell in the streets of Jerusalem, and every man with his staff in his hand for very age. And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in the streets thereof. Thus saith the Lord of hosts; If it be marvellous in the eyes of the remnant of this people in these days, should it also be marvellous in mine eyes? saith the Lord of hosts. Thus saith the Lord of hosts; Behold, I will save my people from the east country, and from the west country; And I will bring them, and they shall dwell in the midst of Jerusalem: and they shall be my people, and I will be their God, in truth and in righteousness.

“ ...

“Thus saith the Lord of hosts; It shall yet come to pass, that there shall come people, and the inhabitants of many cities: And the inhabitants of one city shall go to another, saying, Let us go speedily to pray before the Lord, and to seek the Lord of hosts: I will go also. Yea, many people and strong nations shall come to seek the Lord of hosts in Jerusalem, and to pray before the Lord. Thus saith the Lord of hosts; In those days it shall come to pass, that ten men shall take hold out of all languages of the nations, even shall take hold of the skirt of him that is a Jew, saying, We will go with you: for we have heard that God is with you.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the twelfth Verse of the twelfth Chapter of the First Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians.

“... For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all

baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit. For the body is not one member, but many. If the foot shall say, Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? And if the ear shall say, Because I am not the eye, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling? But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him. And if they were all one member, where were the body? But now are they many members, yet but one body. And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you. Nay, much more those members of the body, which seem to be more feeble, are necessary: And those members of the body, which we think to be less honourable, upon these we bestow more abundant honour; and our uncomely parts have more abundant comeliness. For our comely parts have no need: but God hath tempered the body together, having given more abundant honour to that part which lacked: That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another. And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it. Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular. And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues. Are all apostles? are all prophets? are all teachers? are all workers of miracles? Have all the gifts of healing? do all speak with tongues? do all interpret? But covet earnestly the best gifts."

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the First Lesson: "Thus saith the Lord of hosts; Behold, I will save my people from the east country, and from the west country; And I will bring them, and they shall dwell in the midst of Jerusalem: and they shall be my people, and I will be their God, in truth and in righteousness." In the Name of the Father, and of the † Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Introduction:

Zechariah was a contemporary and colleague of the prophet Haggai [**HAGG-eh-eye**], who wrote in approximately 520 B.C. Like Haggai, he served the community of Jews whom the Persian conquerors of the Babylonians and Assyrians permitted to return to Jerusalem from exile and there to rebuild the Temple destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar.

In Chapter 7 of this book, which is the Chapter just prior to today's First Lesson, Zechariah reports that he received a delegation of prominent Jews from Bethel, a town which was competing with Jerusalem to be the center of gravity for the returnees. This delegation ostensibly came to ask Zechariah's advice and counsel although its actual purpose may have been to underline the decayed state of Jerusalem and thus to buttress Bethel's claims to preëminence.

In the Exile, the Jews had observed two annual fasts in memory of two of their greatest national tragedies: the destruction of the Temple in 586 B.C. and the murder of Gedaliah [**Gedd-uh-LYE-uh**], the last governor of Jerusalem.

In view of the ongoing reconstruction of that Temple and the generally peaceful and prosperous times the returned exiles were enjoying, the deputation asked Zechariah whether these fasts, which commemorated the dark days when the Jews were deprived of the Temple as the center of their worship, should continue to be observed.

Theme:

Zechariah's answer was that these observances should continue, in a transmuted form, because the tragedies they commemorated were but the first chapters in a story that would lead from hard times to good times, "From Fasting to Feasting", as God brought prosperity and hope to His people.

Development:

1. Zechariah prophesied that the exiles would be joined by the other dispersed Jews and their homeland would be restored.

"Thus saith the Lord of hosts; It shall yet come to pass, that there shall come people, and the inhabitants of many cities: And the inhabitants of one city shall go

to another, saying, Let us go speedily to pray before the Lord, and to seek the Lord of hosts: I will go also.”

This describes the ingathering of the exiles that Zechariah foretold, the return of the scattered Jews to their capital and homeland that later resulted in the reestablishment of their national independence at the end of the Old Testament period and during the intertestamental period. As one commentator has put it, these verses declare that “The Lord of Hosts will restore Jerusalem as a peaceful, prosperous city [and] will gather exiles from east and west to dwell in Jerusalem”.

2. Zechariah prophesied that the example of the Jews’ faith and lifestyle would convince many of the “nations”, or Gentiles, of see the superiority of the Jews’ one God and of their covenant-based relationship with Him.

“Yea, many people and strong nations shall come to seek the Lord of hosts in Jerusalem, and to pray before the Lord. Thus saith the Lord of hosts; In those days it shall come to pass, that ten men shall take hold out of all languages of the nations, even shall take hold of the skirt of him that is a Jew, saying, We will go with you: for we have heard that God is with you.”

“Taking hold of the skirt of a Jew” gives a vivid image of an inquirer stopping a Jew in the street to ask about his religion. This image stands for the larger phenomenon of interested Gentiles’ seeking out Jewish mentors and houses of worship to learn the secrets behind the Jews’ elevated personal morality, orderly family relationships, and generally serene personal and communal lives.

As the commentator previously quoted said, “to Zech[ariah] all past catastrophes, in their completeness, become prophecies of wondrous good.... The joy of good hearts will draw people from all nations to the house of God. The watchword is not, ‘Go there,’ but ‘Come with me’.... Where there is evidence that God is working, people are drawn to the scene: Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you....”

These inquirers, driven by the moral and intellectual bankruptcy of the pagan religions, were the origin of the “god fearers”, the “fellow travelers” of Hellenic culture but Jewish sympathies who gathered around the synagogues and who would ultimately form one of the most fertile sources of converts for the first generation of Christians.

3. Under the Mosaic version of the Covenant, Gentiles who were attracted to Judaism were nevertheless excluded from the Covenant People because they had not been born into it.

In today's Second Lesson, St. Paul explains to the Corinthians that the Church of the new version of the Covenant is an organic whole in which disparate people have their appointed roles to play. This organic vision of the Church makes it possible for those not born into it to become fully integrated members, which they could not become in the Church of the old covenant.

Under the Christian dispensation, the accident of physical birth that made one a Jew and another a Gentile has been replaced by the spiritual rebirth of Baptism, in which anyone who declares his or her faith in Jesus may become a member of the people of the new covenant.

The members of the old covenant people related to one another by the roles and relationships of a family, clan or tribal structure imposed by birth. The members of the new covenant people relate to one another through the functions and abilities each has received as a God-given grace.

Conclusion:

In our egalitarian society, especially under the current forces that push to eliminate all recognition of individual differences of any sort, it become increasingly difficult to understand and accept the truth that not all members of the Church are alike. All are equally loved by God and all are of equal value as human beings but not all are alike. There is a great difference between a concept such as equality and one such as identity.

Instead, each of us is distinguished by certain biological realities, such as age, sex, state of health, and by certain highly individual mental and physical abilities, skills, talents, and gifts that some receive but others do not. St. Paul is at pains to explain to the Corinthians that this diversity in gifts is both a fundamental reality of the Church as well as a necessity for it.

The Church functions only through its individual members so if we did not all bring different interests, skills, and graces, then all of the needs and potentialities of the

Church would not be fulfilled. The Church needs its priests and hierarchs but it needs its cooks and janitors just as much. So these differences are truly given to us by God and as such should be celebrated, not denied or ignored.

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*The Rev'd Canon John A. Hollister
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- 1 *Psalms and Lessons for the Church Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER* x (PECUSA 1928).
- 2 Zechariah 8:1-8, 20-23 (KJV).
- 3 I Corinthians 12:12-31a (KJV).
- 4 Zechariah 8:7-8 (KJV).
- 5 Cf. Jeremiah 52:12 ff.
- 6 Cf. 2 Kings 25:8-25.
- 7 Roger N. Carstensen, *The Book of Zechariah*, in CHARLES M. LAYMON, ED., *THE INTERPRETER'S ONE-VOLUME COMMENTARY ON THE BIBLE* 507 (Nashville: Abingdon Press 1971).
- 8 Zechariah 8:20-21 (KJV).
- 9 Carstensen, *op. cit.* 507.
- 10 Zechariah 8:22-23 (KJV).
- 11 Carstensen, *op. cit.* 507.
- 12 R.. E. Higginson, *Zechariah*, in D. GUTHRIE AND J. A. MOTYER, EDS., *THE NEW BIBLE COMMENTARY REVISED*, 3rd ed. 794 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1970).
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