

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER THE FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

Lessons:ⁱ

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the sixty-first Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.ⁱⁱ

“The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me; because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound; To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all that mourn; To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he might be glorified.

“And they shall build the old wastes, they shall raise up the former desolations, and they shall repair the waste cities, the desolations of many generations. And strangers shall stand and feed your flocks, and the sons of the alien shall be your plowmen and your vinedressers. But ye shall be named the Priests of the LORD; men shall call you the Ministers of our God: ye shall eat the riches of the Gentiles, and in their glory shall ye boast yourselves.

“For your shame ye shall have double; and for confusion they shall rejoice in their portion: therefore in their land they shall possess the double: everlasting joy shall be unto them. For I the LORD love judgment, I hate robbery for burnt offering; and I will direct their work in truth, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. And their seed shall be known among the Gentiles, and their offspring among the people: all that see them shall acknowledge them, that they are the seed which the LORD hath blessed. I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for he hath clothed me with the garments of salvation, he hath covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decketh himself with ornaments, and as a bride adorneth herself with her jewels. For as the earth bringeth forth her bud, and as the garden causeth the things that are sown in it to spring forth; so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring forth before all the nations.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the sixteenth Verse of the fourth Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Luke.ⁱⁱⁱ

“And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up: and, as his custom was, he went into the synagogue on the sabbath day, and stood up for to read. And there was delivered unto him the book of the prophet Esaias^{iv} [ih-ZYE-uss]. And when he had opened the book, he found the place where it was written, The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, To preach the acceptable year of the Lord. And he closed the book, and he gave it again to the minister, and sat down. And the eyes of all them that were in the synagogue were fastened on him. And he began to say unto them, This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears. And all bare him witness, and wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth. And they said, Is not this Joseph’s son? And he said unto them, Ye will surely say unto me this proverb, Physician, heal thyself: whatsoever we have heard done in Capernaum [kay-PURR-nay-umm],^v do also here in thy country. And he said, Verily I say unto you, No prophet is accepted in his own country. But I tell you of a truth, many widows were in Israel in the days of Elias^{vi} [ih-LYE-uss],^{vii} when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, when great famine was throughout all the land; But unto none of them was Elias [ih-LYE-uss] sent, save unto Sarepta^{viii} [suh-REPP-tuh],^{ix} a city of Sidon [SIGH-dunn], unto a woman that was a widow.^x And many lepers were in Israel in the time of Eliseus^{xi} [ell-ih-SEE-uss]^{xii} the prophet; and none of them was cleansed, saving Naaman^{xiii} [NAY-uh-munn]^{xiv} the Syrian. And all they in the synagogue, when they heard these things, were filled with wrath, And rose up, and thrust him out of the city, and led him unto the brow of the hill whereon their city was built, that they might cast him down headlong. But he passing through the midst of them went his way, And came down to Capernaum [kay-PURR-nay-umm], a city of Galilee, and taught them on the sabbath days. And they were astonished at his doctrine: for his word was with power.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Physician, heal yourself; what we have heard you did at Capernaum [*kay-PURR-nay-umm*], do here also in your own country.’” And he said, ‘Truly, I say to you, no prophet is acceptable in his own country.’”^{xv} In the Name of the Father, and of the ☩ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Homily:

Remember that the exchange recounted in today’s Second Lesson took place in Nazareth of Galilee, that is, in Jesus’s own home town. He knew the people there and, more to the point, they knew him, as is shown by their reaction to His exposition in the synagogue of the Scriptures: “‘Is not this Joseph’s son?’”^{xvi} He was familiar to them and, as the old proverb teaches us, “Familiarity breeds contempt.”

The Nazarenes simply could not see this well-known young man as a prophet sent from God; how much less then were they prepared to see Him as the Messiah Whose coming had been promised since Isaiah wrote? So it was perfectly natural that they should have felt that Jesus was getting more than a bit above Himself when He concluded that prophetic reading by telling them, “‘Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’”^{xvii}

Not only did they feel He was getting above Himself but they also felt, as most of us probably would, that if He really claimed to be a prophet and a miracle worker, then He could jolly well do some of those miracles for His old acquaintances and fellow townsfolk. They had just heard that He had been off doing miracles for those people over in Capernaum [*kay-PURR-nay-umm*]; well, what were they, the people with whom He had grown up, chopped liver?

They did not have to express these thoughts to Him for He knew what was in their hearts. So he preëmpted their criticisms and told them,

“Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Physician, heal yourself; what we have heard you did at Capernaum [*kay-PURR-nay-umm*], do here also in your own country.’”^{xviii} Having gotten their attention by telling them He knew what they were thinking but not saying, He proceeded to tell them why they were wrong.

And the reason they were wrong was simply that most of the history of God’s dealings with His chosen people could be summarized as a three-act play. In Act I, the Israelites ignore God and do just what they wish to, which also happens to be just what God has told them not to do. In Act II, God sends His prophet to the Israelites to recall them from their erring ways and to bring them back to the observance of the Covenant. In Act III, the Israelites ignore God’s prophet and continue to do just what they were doing before.

And in some versions it is a four- or five-act play, where in Act IV the Israelites turn on God’s prophet, persecute him and then either drive him into exile or kill him. And if they refrain from killing him, and instead just drive him into exile, then in Act V the prophet ministers to the people he finds in his place of exile, instead of to the Israelites who whom he was originally sent.

This play was the all-time sellout production, the ancient Israelite version of Agatha Christie’s “Mousetrap”, and it played over and over in Jerusalem, Shechem [*SHECK-umm*], and all up and down the country. It is this to which Our Lord is referring when He reminds the Nazarenes that “there were many widows in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, when there came a great famine over all the land; and Elijah was sent to none of them but only to Zarephath [*ZARR-ih-fath*],^{xix} in the land of Sidon [*SIGH-dunn*], to a woman who was a widow.”^{xx}

This was a reminder to the Nazarenes of the long drought God sent to Israel because of its sins in following King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, and of Elijah’s flight during that drought from Ahab and Jezebel’s attempts to kill him. God sent Elijah to Phoenicia, to the neighborhood of one of the great Phoenician cities, Sidon [*SIGH-dunn*], where he lodged with a poor widow and her son. The widow had too little food to keep herself and her son alive, let alone a border, so, in a *type* or Biblical

foreshadowing of Our Lord's miraculous feedings of the four thousand and the five thousand, Elijah multiplied handful of flour and little bit of oil, and so fed the widow, her son, and himself until the drought and its resulting famine had passed.^{xxi}

But that was not all that he did, for the widow's son fell ill and died, when Elijah, in a *type* or foreshadowing of Our Lord's raising of Lazarus, prayed to God that the lad might be restored to life, and he was.^{xxii}

Then Jesus also reminded the disbelieving Nazarenes that “there were many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha; and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman [**NAY-uh-munn**] the Syrian.”^{xxiii} This was a reminder of how Elijah's successor, Elisha, who was keeping himself well out of the way of Jehoram [**dgih-HOH-rum**], Ahab's successor,^{xxiv} that is, in a sort of self-imposed exile, cured the leprosy that afflicted the commander of the King of Syria's army.^{xxv}

In other words, what Our Lord was telling the Nazarenes was, “When the Israelites were not receptive to the prophets of the Lord, they remained prophets despite their countrymen's lack of acceptance, and so the non-Israelites around us were the ones to benefit from their healing ministries.” This, of course, was a direct reference to how the Jews would treat Him, too.

Conclusion:

This teaching applies just as much to us, who are sitting here listening to this sermon, as it does to the officially accredited prophets such as Elijah and Elisha or to Our Lord Himself. For each one of us has, in his or her Baptism and Confirmation, been commissioned a prophet and our mission as prophets is to the whole world.^{xxvi} And, as prophets to that world, we can reasonably expect no better treatment than it has accorded to those prophets that came before us.

But we were not commissioned to enjoy a comfortable mission, travelling first class or in custom tour coaches, staying in five-star hotels and eating in luxurious restaurants, receiving the adulation of eager crowds of thousands. Our task is to speak to all who will hear us, one by

one, whenever and wherever we encounter them, and regardless of the disbelief, derision, and hostility with which we may be met. Our task is to speak to them of Jesus, whose lot was even harder than ours, and Who loves them, so that they may come to bring them to know Him and to love Him in return.

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

ⁱⁱ *Isaiah 61:1-11 (KJV).*

ⁱⁱⁱ *St. Luke 4:16-32 (KJV).*

^{iv} *I.e., Isaiah.*

^v *Adapted from W. MURRAY SEVERANCE, PRONOUNCING BIBLE NAMES 25 (Holman Bible Publishers, 1985).*

^{vi} *I.e., Elijah.*

^{vii} *SEVERANCE, op. cit. 30.*

^{viii} *I.e., Zarephath.*

^{ix} *Cf. SEVERANCE, op. cit. 67.*

^x *1 Kings 17:8-24.*

^{xi} *I.e., Elisha.*

^{xii} *Cf. SEVERANCE, op. cit. 30.*

^{xiii} *2 Kings 5:1-23.*

^{xiv} *Cf. SEVERANCE, op. cit. 58.*

^{xv} *St. Luke 4:23-24 (RSV).*

^{xvi} *St. Luke 4:22b (RSV).*

^{xvii} *St. Luke 4:21 (RSV).*

^{xviii} *St. Luke 4:23 (RSV).*

^{xix} *Cf. SEVERANCE, op. cit. 78.*

^{xx} *St. Luke 4:25-26 (RSV).*

^{xxi} *1 Kings 17:8-16.*

^{xxii} *1 Kings 17:17-24.*

^{xxiii} *St. Luke 4:27 (RSV).*

^{xxiv} *That is, if one disregards the brief and undistinguished intervening reign of Ahaziah. But see 2 Kings 3:5-6.*

^{xxv} *2 Kings 5:1-27.*

^{xxvi} *St. Matthew 28:18-20.*

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