

Sermon for Morning Prayer The Third Sunday in Lent

Lessons:

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the first Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Zechariah [**ZECK-are-eye-uh**].

“In the eighth month, in the second year of Darius [**DARR-eye-uss**], came the word of the Lord unto Zechariah [**ZECK-are-eye-uh**], the son of Berechiah [**BEAR-eh-kyeuh**], the son of Iddo [**IH-doe**] the prophet, saying, The Lord hath been sore displeased with your fathers. Therefore say thou unto them, Thus saith the Lord of hosts; Turn ye unto me, saith the Lord of hosts, and I will turn unto you, saith the Lord of hosts. Be ye not as your fathers, unto whom the former prophets have cried, saying, Thus saith the Lord of hosts; Turn ye now from your evil ways, and from your evil doings: but they did not hear, nor hearken unto me, saith the Lord. Your fathers, where are they? and the prophets, do they live for ever? But my words and my statutes, which I commanded my servants the prophets, did they not take hold of your fathers? and they returned and said, Like as the Lord of hosts thought to do unto us, according to our ways, and according to our doings, so hath he dealt with us.

“....

“Then the angel of the Lord answered and said, O Lord of hosts, how long wilt thou not have mercy on Jerusalem and on the cities of Judah, against which thou hast had indignation these threescore and ten years? And the Lord answered the angel that talked with me with good words and comfortable words. So the angel that communed with me said unto me, Cry thou, saying, Thus saith the Lord of hosts; I am jealous for Jerusalem and for Zion with a great jealousy. And I am very sore displeased with the heathen that are at ease: for I was but a little displeased, and they helped forward the affliction. Therefore thus saith the Lord; I am returned to Jerusalem with mercies: my house shall be built in it, saith the Lord of hosts, and a line shall be stretched forth upon Jerusalem. Cry yet, saying, Thus saith the Lord of hosts; My cities through prosperity shall yet be spread abroad; and the Lord shall yet comfort Zion, and shall yet choose Jerusalem.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the twentyseventh Verse of the eighth Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Mark.

“And Jesus went out, and his disciples, into the towns of Caesarea Philippi [**SAYS-ah-ree-uh FILL-ipp-eye**]: and by the way he asked his disciples, saying unto them, Whom do men say that I am? And they answered, John the Baptist: but some say, Elias [**EE-lye-uss**]; and others, One of the prophets. And he saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am? And Peter answereth and saith unto him, Thou art the Christ. And he charged them that they should tell no man of him. And he began to teach them, that the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected of the elders, and of the chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. And he spake that saying openly. And Peter took him, and began to rebuke him. But when he had turned about and looked on his disciples, he rebuked Peter, saying, Get thee behind me, Satan: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but the things that be of men.

“And when he had called the people unto him with his disciples also, he said unto them, Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel’s, the same shall save it. For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? Whosoever therefore shall be ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation; of him also shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.

“And he said unto them, Verily I say unto you, That there be some of them that stand here, which shall not taste of death, till they have seen the kingdom of God come with power.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “And he saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am? And Peter answereth and saith unto him, Thou art the Christ. And he charged them that they should tell no man of him.” In the Name of the Father, and of the † Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Introduction:

I have often been puzzled by the occasions in the Gospels when Our Lord performed some miracle, such as a healing miracle, or revealed some truth to His followers, and then immediately told His watchers or hearers not to divulge to others what He had just done or said. What could be the point of this concealment, when He came in the first place to teach mankind?

Today's Gospel passage, when Christ asks His disciples who they think He is, is one of those puzzling incidents. Once His careful questioning had brought them to the realization that He was the Messiah, the Anointed One whose coming was foretold in the (Old Testament) Scriptures, why did He not want them to trumpet this realization to the world?

Theme:

The answer seems to be that Our Lord was acutely aware of the need for His ministry to unfold and develop completely, to fulfill its entire course from His baptism to His Resurrection, in order that its full significance could be seen by His followers and those to whom they would preach, with eyes aided by that infallible instrument, "20/20 hindsight".

That way, the Truth of His teachings, and especially of His divinity, would be for those with open minds both unmistakable and incontestable. If the people came too soon to realize Who He was and what His mission was, before the Passion story had reached its appointed end, they would lack some of the evidence they would later need to sustain their faith and commitment in the face of their doubting neighbors and friends and especially during the harsh persecutions that were to come.

Development:

Today's Second Lesson begins with Our Lord's putting two questions to His disciples. The first is about the general reaction to Him and to His ministry: What did the people think about Him, who did they think He was? The answer was rather generic: the people thought He was someone special, not unlike several of the great figures of the distant and even recent past, but there was no agreement on which of those figures He most resembled.

The second question was much more pointed: Who did the disciples themselves think He was? The first question has laid the groundwork by making them reflect on the general reaction of the populace to Him. That made them realize that the general impression of someone who was important in an undefined way was woefully inadequate to explain their own experience of Him and of His powers.

However, the form of that first question had put them on the right track. As they reported to Him the people's speculations about His identity, all couched in terms of past prophets and especially of prophets who were believed to have prefigured the Messiah, they came to the inescapable realization that He was, in fact, that very Messiah to whom the Scriptures had pointed.

Eager, impatient St. Peter, like an excited child in class, burst out with the answer ahead of his fellows: "Thou art the Christ", that is, "You are the *Meshiach* [**MESH-eyeach**], the Anointed One".

As one commentator wrote, "This confession is the crisis-point of the teaching of Jesus and the watershed which divides the Gospel record in two. Jesus Himself had been aware of His Messianic mission at least from the beginning of His public ministry ...; aware too of the suffering involved and of the necessity of the cross which had shadowed His pathway from the first.... But only at this decisive point did He begin to speak of it plainly. And from this point Mark's narrative becomes governed by the one purpose of establishing ... that Jesus was not taken unawares, but that the course of events was foreknown, and indeed was part of the predetermined counsel of God...."

In other words, St. Mark intends to prove that Our Lord knew and nevertheless accepted His fate, that He made Himself a willing sacrifice for us and for our salvation. It was at this "crisis-point of the teaching of Jesus" that He directed His Apostles and disciples not to reveal the truth to which He had led them by means of what, in a university or graduate school, we might call "Socratic questioning". The students had learned the facts of the situation but did not yet have enough breadth of information, enough exposure, to be able to draw the correct conclusions from those facts. As our commentator writes:

"The disciples were right as to the fact [of Our Lord's Messiahship], but wrong in what they understood by it. The O[ld] T[estament] prophets foreshadowed the Messiah in two ways, as triumphant ... and as suffering.... The Jews cherished the

material and political implications of the former and conveniently ignored or rejected the spiritual implications of the latter. And at this stage even the disciples shared the common view.”

So the disciples must not reveal Christ’s Messiahship until He had won His victory over death. As St. Matthew had already written a few Chapters earlier, on one of these occasions when Our Lord told His followers to keep to themselves what they had seen and heard,

“... Behold my servant, whom I have chosen; my beloved, in whom my soul is well pleased: I will put my spirit upon him, and he shall shew [**SHOW**] judgment to the Gentiles. He shall not strive, nor cry; neither shall any man hear his voice in the streets. A bruised reed shall he not break, and smoking flax shall he not quench, till he send forth judgment unto victory. And in his name shall the Gentiles trust.”

That is, He will avoid display or show, He will be meek and submissive even to the point of suffering and death, and that suffering and death will convict the nations of His Truth. But that conviction will require those Gentiles to have seen the fullness of His endurance and acceptance of suffering before they can perceive the real nature of His Sacrifice of Himself.

Conclusion:

Therefore, until that final victory has been accomplished, the disciples must hold His true nature in confidence. Once all the evidence has been laid before those who must decide, then they may make their arguments from that evidence; their preaching may tell their hearers Who Christ is and what He came to do.

We live in that post-Resurrection period. We know the evidence given by His life, work, teaching, and Passion. We are the successors to those disciples. We now must pick up their task and make their argument to the world.

--oo0oo--

*The Rev'd Canon John A. Hollister
March 15, 2009.*

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

2 Zechariah 1:1-6, 12-17 (KJV).

3 *St. Mark* 8:27-9:1 (KJV).

4 *St. Mark* 8:29-30 (KJV); cf. *St. Luke* 9:21.

5 E.g., *St. Matthew* 16:20; 12:16.

6 The author is indebted for these insights to C.E. Graham Swift, Mark, D. GUTHRIE AND J.A. MOTYER, EDS., *THE NEW BIBLE COMMENTARY: REVISED* 3rd ed. 869 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1970).

7 *St. Mark* 8:29b (KJV).

8 Graham Swift, *op. cit.*

9 *Ibid.*

10 *St. Matthew* 12:18-21 (KJV).

11 Priest Assistant, Christ Anglican Catholic Church, Metairie LA. Honorary Canon, the Diocese of the Resurrection, and Honorary Canon and Canon to the Ordinary, The Diocese of New Orleans, The Anglican Catholic Church.