

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER

The Fourteenth Sunday after Trinityⁱ

Lessons:ⁱⁱ

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the forty-fifth Chapter of the First Book of Moses, called Genesis.ⁱⁱⁱ

“Then Joseph could not refrain himself before all them that stood by him; and he cried, Cause every man to go out from me. And there stood no man with him, while Joseph made himself known unto his brethren. And he wept aloud: and the Egyptians and the house of Pharaoh heard. And Joseph said unto his brethren, I am Joseph; doth my father yet live? And his brethren could not answer him; for they were troubled at his presence. And Joseph said unto his brethren, Come near to me, I pray you. And they came near. And he said, I am Joseph your brother, whom ye sold into Egypt. Now therefore be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that ye sold me hither: for God did send me before you to preserve life. For these two years hath the famine been in the land: and yet there are five years, in the which there shall neither be earring nor harvest. And God sent me before you to preserve you a posterity in the earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So now it was not you that sent me hither, but God: and he hath made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house, and a ruler throughout all the land of Egypt. Haste ye, and go up to my father, and say unto him, Thus saith [SETH] thy son Joseph, God hath made me lord of all Egypt: come down unto me, tarry not: And thou shalt dwell in the land of Goshen, and thou shalt be near unto me, thou, and thy children, and thy children’s children, and thy flocks, and thy herds, and all that thou hast: And there will I nourish thee; for yet there are five years of famine; lest thou, and thy household, and all that thou hast, come to poverty. And, behold, your eyes see, and the eyes of my brother Benjamin, that it is my mouth that speaketh unto you. And ye shall tell my father of all my glory in Egypt, and of all that ye have seen; and ye shall haste and bring down my father hither. And he fell upon his brother Benjamin’s neck, and wept; and Benjamin wept upon his neck. Moreover he kissed all his brethren, and wept upon them: and after that his brethren talked with him.

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“And they went up out of Egypt, and came into the land of Canaan [KAY-nunn] unto Jacob their father, And told him, saying, Joseph is yet alive, and he is governor over all the land of Egypt. And Jacob’s heart fainted, for he believed them not. And they told him all the words of Joseph, which he had said unto them: and when he saw the wagons which Joseph had sent to carry him, the spirit of Jacob their father revived: And Israel said, It is enough; Joseph my son is yet alive: I will go and see him before I die.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the ninth Verse of the twelfth Chapter of the Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Romans.^{iv}

“... Let love be without dissimulation. Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good. Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another; Not slothful in business; fervent in spirit; serving the Lord; Rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation; continuing instant in prayer; Distributing to the necessity of saints; given to hospitality. Bless them which persecute you: bless, and curse not. Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep. Be of the same mind one toward another. Mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate. Be not wise in your own conceits. Recompense to no man evil for evil. Provide things honest in the sight of all men. If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men. Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith [SETH] the Lord. Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Epistle: “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay,

says the Lord.””^v In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen*.

Introduction, Theme, and Development:

Being humans, and especially being humans who are inescapably afflicted with what theologians call “original sin”, that is, with natures that seek to act contrary to God’s will for us, we are constantly tempted to avenge the wrongs others have done to us – or, at least, the wrongs we imagine others have done to us.

To understand how it is that we are so beset by these adverse impulses, we have only to look at the Articles of Religion, where the ninth Article teaches us:

“Original sin ... is the fault and corruption of the Nature of every man, that naturally is engendered in the offspring of Adam; whereby man is very far gone from original righteousness, and is of his own nature inclined to evil, so that the flesh lusteth always contrary to the Spirit; and therefore in every person born into this world, it deserveth God’s wrath and condemnation.”^{vi}

Thus, as with all the other things that lead us into sin, and regardless of the fact that that God has commanded us not to take vengeance on others, our natural instincts thrust us toward that self-indulgence in revenge. However, even the ancient pagans, who had no concept of sin, let alone of original sin, recognized that one of the prime functions of morality is to teach us to reign in our instincts and impulses.

That is why the Greek and Roman philosophers placed so much emphasis on the cultivation of the virtues, the qualities that act as counterpoises to our innate vices. In their classic formulation, these much-desired virtues were summarized in the four Cardinal Virtues: Temperance, Prudence, Justice, and Fortitude.^{vii} It does not take a great deal of thought to recognize how each of those Cardinal Virtues acts as a restraint upon our natural impulses respectively to excess, to impulsiveness, to selfishness, and to laziness or cowardice.

Now these overpowering natural instincts to do harm arise in all areas of our lives but they are particularly strong when they are urging us to lash out at those who we see as having wronged us. In part this is because of a desire to redress the balance between us and them. In part, it is the product of anger, the sort of anger into which fear quickly changes. And fear is usually our first reaction when something harms us, because that harm forces us to confront our own vulnerability.

It is not an especially Christian observation that vengeance belongs to the Lord, not to us; after all, this was first revealed to the ancient Hebrews in the Book of Proverbs, long before the advent of Christianity. It is, however, a revelation that was made uniquely to those Hebrews, out of all the other ancient peoples, so it is firmly fixed within the Judeo-Christian tradition. And if we truly believe in a just God, then we must be satisfied to leave to that God the rendering of punishment for the transgressions that others may commit against us.

Notice, however, that we have here been considering the matter of taking revenge. There is nothing unChristian, nothing contrary to God's law, in our taking reasonable and prudent steps to protect ourselves from harms that might beset us, even when those harms would be inflicted by others who have already hurt us or those we love. Prudence, after all, is one of those four Cardinal Virtues about which we spoke earlier. Also, in the Scriptural account of the Creation there is a clear implication that we are to exercise wise stewardship over all with which God has entrusted us,^{viii} and such stewardship certainly includes avoiding reasonably foreseeable causes of damage.

So, for example, there is nothing vengeful about refusing to hire a known thief for a position that would involve contact with money or with valuable property. There is nothing vengeful about taking prudent precautions to protect ourselves and those for whom we are responsible from persons who are known to have, or who are reasonably believed to have, violent propensities.

The difference between taking vengeance, on the one hand, and being the victim – even the self-defending victim – of a criminal, on the other hand, is simple. When we set out to take vengeance on others, we either hunt them down – whether literally or metaphorically – in their

usual habitats or we lure them into our usual habitat so we can ambush them.

That is, we are deliberately moving into those others' spaces in order that we may do them harm, so our actions leading up to that confrontation are active ones.

In contrast, when we defending ourselves against another's attack, that attacker has moved into our space, in order that he or she may do us harm. Thus our actions leading up to that confrontation are purely passive ones. The prohibition on taking vengeance forbids us to become vigilantes; it does not command us to become helpless patsies.

Conclusion:

Finally, there are emotional benefits to us if we follow God's injunction about vengeance – even if, perhaps, the emotions involved are not the most worthy ones. There was an English clergyman who was also a famous poet,^{ix} whose cure had a name so *outré* that it sounds like a caricature taken from some particularly light-hearted novel. And what the Vicar of Fugglestone St. Peter with Bremerton St. Andrew wrote that bears on today's topic was, "Living well is the best revenge."

Or, as St. Paul told the Romans in today's Second Lesson, quoting one of the ancient Hebrew Proverbs:^x "'if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink; for by so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."^{xi}

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January 23, 2011

ⁱ *This was originally written as a sermon for Mass on the Third Sunday after the Epiphany, 2011.*

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

ⁱⁱⁱ *Genesis 45:1-15, 25-28 (KJV).*

^{iv} *Romans 12:9-end (KJV).*

^v *Romans 12:19 (RSV), quoting Deuteronomy 32:35.*

^{vi} *Article IX, Of Original or Birth-Sin, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 604 (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*

^{vii} *See, e.g., PLATO, THE REPUBLIC 427e and 435b; MARCUS TULLIUS CICERO, DE INVENTIONE, II, LIII. The term “cardinal” comes from the Latin cardo, or hinge, for the moral life hangs on these virtues in the same way a door hangs on its hinges. To these “Cardinal”, “Pagan”, or “Natural” Virtues, Christianity has traditionally added three “Christian” or “Theological” Virtues: Faith, Hope, and Charity (or Love).*

^{viii} *Genesis 1:26-30.*

^{ix} *George Herbert (1597-1633).*

^x *Proverbs 25:21-22.*

^{xi} *Romans 12:20-21 (RSV).*

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