

Sermon for Morning Prayer Trinity XVII

Lessons:

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the fifteenth Verse of the thirteenth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah.

“Hear ye, and give ear; be not proud: for the Lord hath spoken. Give glory to the Lord your God, before he cause darkness, and before your feet stumble upon the dark mountains, and, while ye look for light, he turn it into the shadow of death, and make it gross darkness. But if ye will not hear it, my soul shall weep in secret places for your pride; and mine eye shall weep sore, and run down with tears, because the Lord’s flock is carried away captive. Say unto the king and to the queen, Humble yourselves, sit down: for your principalities shall come down, even the crown of your glory. The cities of the south shall be shut up, and none shall open them: Judah shall be carried away captive all of it, it shall be wholly carried away captive. Lift up your eyes, and behold them that come from the north: where is the flock that was given thee, thy beautiful flock? What wilt thou say when he shall punish thee? for thou hast taught them to be captains, and as chief over thee: shall not sorrows take thee, as a woman in travail?”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the thirty-fifth Verse of the tenth Chapter of the Gospel according to St. Mark.

“And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, come unto him, saying, Master, we would that thou shouldest do for us whatsoever we shall desire. And he said unto them, What would ye that I should do for you? They said unto him, Grant unto us that we may sit, one on thy right hand, and the other on thy left hand, in thy glory. But Jesus said unto them, Ye know not what ye ask: can ye drink of the cup that I drink of? and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with? And they said unto him, We can. And Jesus said unto them, Ye shall indeed drink of the cup that I drink of; and with the baptism that I am baptized withal shall ye be baptized: But to sit on my right hand and on my left hand is not mine to give; but it shall be given to them for whom it is prepared. And when the ten heard it, they began to be much

displeased with James and John. But Jesus called them to him, and saith unto them, Ye know that they which are accounted to rule over the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and their great ones exercise authority upon them. But so shall it not be among you: but whosoever will be great among you, shall be your minister: And whosoever of you will be the chiefest, shall be servant of all. For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “[W]hosoever will be great among you, shall be your minister: And whosoever of you will be the chiefest, shall be the servant of all.” In the Name of the Father, and of the † Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Introduction:

Throughout His three years’ ministry, Christ took many fundamental personal, familial, social, and religious relationships as they existed in His day, and gave them a new and distinctively Christian character which altered their underlying nature and emphases. So, too, He recast the concept of leadership, at least as leadership was to be known and practiced within the confines of the Church He founded to be His presence in the world after His Ascension.

Just as Christ himself introduced this change by contrasting the attitudes characteristic of the old, pre-Christian concept of leadership with the requirements of the new, Christ-given concept, so our two Lessons today begin by exploring the failures the old concept exhibited, particularly as the corruption and disunity engendered by pride and selfpreoccupation led directly to the loss of Jewish political and cultural independence that resulted from the falls and captivities of the two independent Jewish kingdoms that had existed after King Solomon.

In today’s First Lesson, Jeremiah deals with three stages in the drawn-out process by which southern Kingdom of Judah was destroyed by the Babylonians, a process that had been foreshadowed by the prior destruction of the northern Kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians. This time, too, the Babylonian incursions resulted in the

similar destruction of the southern kingdom and the deportation of most of its population and all of its traditional leadership.

Theme:

The theme of today's Second Lesson is the nature of Christian leadership.

Development:

1. Leadership in the New Testament Church is *not* the glorification or exaltation of the leaders.

Jeremiah was unsuccessful in warning the ancient Jewish leaders of the dangers into which their pride would lead them: "Hear ye, and give ear, be not proud"; "my soul shall weep in secret for your pride", "Say unto the king and to the queen, Humble yourselves, sit down: for your principalities shall come down, even the crown of your glory."

Christ makes oblique reference to the attitudes that made Jeremiah's warnings necessary: "Ye know that they which are accounted to rule over the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and their great ones exercise authority upon them."

But Christ expressly tells His followers that this ancient pattern of lordship will not be the pattern of leadership for His Church: "But so it shall not be among you".

2. Leadership in the New Testament Church is a ministry of service.

Immediately after giving that warning that the fundamental nature of leadership is undergoing a seismic shift – a shift, for example, similar in scope to the one He made in the nature of marriage when He raised it from a contract and a social status to a Sacrament – He gave His followers that new pattern for the New Testament concept of the leader: "[B]ut whosoever will be great among you, shall be your minister: And whosoever of you will be the chiefest, shall be servant of all."

Perhaps the easiest way to understand the full extent of this change, other than to look at the accustomed behavior of the old order leaders, such as those whom Jeremiah addressed, is to compare it to the analogous change Christ made in the

marital relationship. In a world in which the husband and father held the power of life and death over his wife and children, Christ instructed him: “For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and cleave to his wife; And they twain shall be one flesh: so that they are no more twain, but one flesh.”

Significantly, this teaching on the new nature of marriage, and therefore of a man’s headship within the family, occurs earlier in the same chapter from which today’s Second Lesson is taken. What Christ’s Apostles understood it to mean is explained by St. Paul as: “Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave him self for it; ... So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself.”

It would be difficult to imagine anything farther from the stern Roman *pater familias*, with his power to flog or kill his dependents, or the Jewish patriarch who could divorce his wife at a word or sell his children into slavery.

3. The model for New Testament leadership is Christ’s own self-sacrificing love for His people.

Note that when St. Paul instructed husbands in their duties toward their wives and children, he told them they were to display the same love for their dependents that Christ displayed for His Church when He gave His life for it. This teaching on the utterly self-sacrificing nature of a husband’s love simply reflects Christ’s own teaching on the nature of leadership in general:

“But so it shall not be among you: but whosoever will be great among you, shall be your minister: And whosoever of you will be the chiefest, shall be servant of all. **For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.**”

So we see that the New Testament idea of leadership is one of self-sacrificing love, modeled directly on Christ’s all self-sacrificing love for His Church. The question this leaves us with is a very uncomfortable one for each of us to consider in his or her heart of hearts. Each of us must formulate that question in a way that reflects the individual situations in which we find ourselves and then must answer it accordingly.

Taking as examples the situations and relationships in which I live, I must ask myself:

Do I, as your minister, and as a leader in the Church, love you and it enough to sacrifice myself for you at need?

In today's world, this is no idle pipe dream; we can easily go on the Internet and learn the names of Nigerian bishops who are regularly threatened with death by armed thugs but who have not given up proclaiming the Gospel of Christ.

Do I, as a husband and father, love my wife and child enough to sacrifice myself for them at need?

Whether in a house fire or on a sinking vessel, or confronted by a gang of armed home invaders, others have already been forced to answer this question.

Do I, as a citizen, love my community and my country enough to sacrifice myself for them at need?

Thousands upon thousands have had to give the answer to this one; why would I be different enough that the dilemma could never come to me?

Do I, as a Christian, love my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ enough to sacrifice myself for Him, if called upon to do so?

The Christian faith has never been free from the peril of martyrdom and it is just as real a threat today as it has ever been. Nor can we be confident that this is only a reality in so-called "Third World" countries for the terrorists who hate us and hate our religion are doing everything within their power to bring that "Third World" into our "First World".

How will I answer these questions if inescapable circumstances suddenly call upon me to do so?

Conclusion:

If my character and my faith are ever put to any one of those ultimate tests, I hope they will acquit themselves with credit. Perhaps this week I am more conscious than

I usually am of the way life has of suddenly confronting us with difficult choices. One reason for this heightened consciousness is, of course, that the place I live in South Louisiana was recently threatened by a major hurricane and now, as I write this, is feeling the peripheral effects of another one. But the real reason is probably the short pilgrimage I made this week to a place associated with one of my childhood heroes.

Tuesday evening, driving from Indiana to New Orleans, I stopped about 30 miles north of Jackson, Mississippi at the decaying community of Vaughn. I walked a mile up the Illinois Central tracks from the site of the now disappeared railroad station to the beginning of a long curve. There, in the early morning hours of April 30, 1900, the engineer of I.C. locomotive number 382, pulling a southbound passenger express, came out of that curve to see the line ahead blocked by the caboose and last three cars of a freight that should have been pulled completely onto a siding.

A collision was certain because there was not enough distance for the express to stop completely. However, the engineer could have saved himself by jumping from the engine, as engine crews commonly did when faced with collisions. He told his fireman to jump and the fireman survived with only bruises.

The engineer, however, never hesitated. He applied the airbrakes, threw the valve gear into reverse, and held on to the controls to slow the engine as much as possible. Slowed but still moving rapidly, it struck the freight, demolishing its caboose, two freight cars, and half of the third – and derailing and destroying the express locomotive. The passenger cars were saved and all of the passengers survived without serious injury; the only casualty was the engineer himself.

Jonathan Luther Jones, a devout Roman Catholic layman, instinctively gave his own life for the passengers entrusted to his care. “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.”

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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 St. Mark 10:43b-44 (KJV).

3 By Sargon II in 720 B.C..

4 By Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C.

5 Jeremiah 13:15a (KJV).

6 Ibid. 13:17a.

7 Ibid. 13:18.

8 St. Mark 42 (KJV).

9 Ibid. 10:43a.

10 Ibid. 10:43b-44.

11 Ibid. 10:7-8.

12 Ephesians 5:25, 28 (KJV).

13 Ibid. 5:25.

14 Ibid. 5:45 (emphasis supplied).

15 The siding itself is now also gone.

16 Best known by the nickname derived from his boyhood home, Cayce, Kentucky: "Casey" Jones.

17 St. John 15:13 (KJV).

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