

Sermon for Morning Prayer The Seventeenth Sunday After Trinity

I. Lessons:ⁱ

A. The First Lesson: Here beginneth the fifth Chapter of the Second Book of Moses, called Exodus.ⁱⁱ

“And afterward Moses and Aaron went in, and told Pharaoh, Thus saith the LORD God of Israel, Let my people go, that they may hold a feast unto me in the wilderness. And Pharaoh said, Who is the LORD, that I should obey his voice to let Israel go? I know not the LORD, neither will I let Israel go. And they said, The God of the Hebrews hath met with us: let us go, we pray thee, three days’ journey into the desert, and sacrifice unto the LORD our God; lest he fall upon us with pestilence, or with the sword. And the king of Egypt said unto them, Wherefore do ye, Moses and Aaron, let the people from their works? get you unto your burdens. And Pharaoh said, Behold, the people of the land now are many, and ye make them rest from their burdens. And Pharaoh commanded the same day the taskmasters of the people, and their officers, saying, Ye shall no more give the people straw to make brick, as heretofore: let them go and gather straw for themselves. And the tale of the bricks, which they did make heretofore, ye shall lay upon them; ye shall not diminish aught thereof: for they be idle; therefore they cry, saying, Let us go and sacrifice to our God. Let there more work be laid upon the men, that they may labour therein; and let them not regard vain words.

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“... And the officers of the children of Israel did see that they were in evil case, after it was said, Ye shall not minish aught from your bricks of your daily task.

“And they met Moses and Aaron, who stood in the way, as they came forth from Pharaoh: And they said unto them, The LORD look upon you, and judge; because ye have made our savour to be abhorred in the eyes of Pharaoh, and in the eyes of his servants, to put a sword in their hand to slay us. And Moses returned unto the LORD, and said, Lord, wherefore hast thou so evil entreated this people? why is it that thou hast sent me? For since I came to Pharaoh to speak in thy name, he

hath done evil to this people; neither hast thou delivered thy people at all.

“Then the LORD said unto Moses, Now shalt thou see what I will do to Pharaoh: for with a strong hand shall he let them go, and with a strong hand shall he drive them out of his land.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

B. The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the third Chapter of the Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews.ⁱⁱⁱ

“Wherefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our profession, Christ Jesus; Who was faithful to him that appointed him, as also Moses was faithful in all his house. For this man was counted worthy of more glory than Moses, inasmuch as he who hath builded the house hath more honour than the house. For every house is builded by some man; but he that built all things is God. And Moses verily was faithful in all his house, as a servant, for a testimony of those things which were to be spoken after; But Christ as a son over his own house; whose house are we, if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end. Wherefore (as the Holy Ghost saith, To day if ye will hear his voice, Harden not your hearts, as in the provocation, in the day of temptation in the wilderness: When your fathers tempted me, proved me, and saw my works forty years. Wherefore I was grieved with that generation, and said, They do alway err [URR] in their heart; and they have not known my ways. So I swear in my wrath, They shall not enter into my rest.) Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God. But exhort one another daily, while it is called To day; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. For we are made partakers of Christ, if we hold the beginning of our confidence stedfast unto the end; While it is said, To day if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts, as in the provocation. For some, when they had heard, did provoke: howbeit not all that came out of Egypt by Moses. But with whom was he grieved forty years? was it not with them that had sinned, whose carcasses fell in the wilderness? And to whom swore he that they should not enter into his rest, but to them that believed not? So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

II. Text:

From the Second Lesson:

“Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says,
‘Today, when you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion,
on the day of testing in the wilderness,
where your fathers put me to the test
and saw my works for forty years.
Therefore was I provoked with that generation,
and said, “They always go astray in their hearts;
they have not known my ways.”
As I swore in my wrath,
“They shall never enter my rest.”’”^{iv}

In the Name of the Father, and of the ☩ Son, and of the Holy Ghost.
Amen.

III. Introduction:

Today’s Second Lesson is part of a long discourse the author of the Letter to the Hebrews directed toward some early Christians who, for unexplained reasons but certainly at least in part because of social and familial pressure, were at risk of abandoning their new Faith and returning to Judaism.

That discourse is framed around three assertions about the unmatched qualities of Jesus Christ as the Messiah: His superiority to several groups and persons in the Old Testament; His priesthood’s superiority to that of the Aaronic one; and His one all-encompassing sacrifice’s superiority to the repetitious animal sacrifices of that Old Testament priesthood.^v

IV. Theme:

Chapter 3 of this Letter, which actually comprises today's Second Lesson, comes from the first of those three heads of argument, the one where the author asserts Our Lord's superiority to certain groups and individuals in the Old Testament. It is, in fact, the portion of that argument that details Christ's superiority to that greatest of Old Testament men, God's chosen leader for the redemption of His people from bondage in Egypt, Moses.

And most specifically, in order to remind his readers of how, on their very journey out of slavery toward freedom that is the subject of today's First Lesson, the Hebrews lost no time in setting their own wills against that of the God who had saved them, the author quotes the words from Psalm 95, Verses 7-11, which form the "text" I read you when I began this sermon.

V. Developement:

These Verses from Psalm 95 deserve to be better known to us than they are, at least than they are to most in the U.S.A. Thomas Cranmer, the original redactor of our Book of Common Prayer, intended that they should be very well known to all of us. For that reason, he assigned the whole of Psalm 95 to be the one "fixed Psalm" in the Daily Offices of Morning and Evening Prayer. Under its Latin title of *Venite* [**venn-EE-tay**] *exultemus Domino*, it is the Psalm that is recited every day during Morning Prayer just prior to that morning's variable selection from the remainder of the Psalter. In all traditional Books of Common Prayer except the American one, that Psalm 95 is still read in that way at the beginning of every day.

In 1789, however, when the newly-independent American Province adopted its own Book of Common Prayer to replace the English edition of 1662, the last four Verses^{vi} were omitted from Psalm 95 as it is printed in Morning Prayer. In their place, two discontinuous Verses from Psalm 96^{vii} were moved up and joined to the truncated stem of Psalm 95.

Let me repeat: among all traditional Anglican Books of Common Prayer, it is only the American one that thus splices bits of two Psalms together to create a new *Venite* [**venn-EE-tay**], for although the Scottish

BCP of 1929 does permit those four offending Verses to be omitted, it does not substitute anything else in their place.

These omitted Verses are the Psalmist's direct reference to God's mercy in providing water for the thirsty Israelites at the rock of Horeb,^{viii} otherwise known as Massah, or "the Place of Testing", or Meribah, "the Place of Finding Fault". This incident is an obvious "type" or prefiguring of Our Lord as the Water of Life.^{ix}

In addition, it is the place where God found fault with Moses and Aaron for their not having stood up on His behalf by confronting the backbiting of the murmuring Israelites. In punishment for this misfeasance in office, God decreed that neither of those leaders should actually set foot in the Promised Land.^x This is the "testing" referred to in the Psalm and it is Moses and Aaron's personal exclusion from the Promised Land that is referred to in the Psalm's statement that "Therefore I swore in my anger that they should not enter my rest."^{xi}

This original reference by the Psalmist to this one specific Old Testament event was the reason Bishop William White, the second Bishop of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the U.S.A. and its first Presiding Bishop, offered this rather lame excuse for truncating Psalm 95: "We left out the latter part of the 'Venite,' as being limited to the condition of the Jews."^{xii}

In other words, according to Bishop White, the only relevance of those Verses is to God's specific punishments of the faithless Hebrews for violations of the Mosaic Covenant during their forty years' wanderings in Sinai from the time of their Exodus from Egypt until their entry into Canaan [**KEH-nann**]. Therefore he did not see it as having any relevance to us or to our performance as we attempt to live out the new and everlasting Covenant inaugurated by Our Lord Jesus Christ.

It is perhaps understandable that Churchmen of the age of the so-called Enlightenment would have felt they could dispense with such reminders that God does, indeed, exact retributive justice from those who deliberately flout their obligations to Him. This notion is no more popular with Churchmen of our own time than it was with those of the

late Eighteenth Century. Unpopularity, however, is no sure guide to unreliability, especially where religious truths are concerned.

VI. Conclusion:

Moreover, if we were to accept Bishop White's explanation for jettisoning Psalm 95's reference to God's chastisement of Moses and Aaron, then we would have to accept certain other premises as well.

For example, we would have to treat important Old Testament accounts, such as that of the Exodus from Egypt, as mere chronicles of events, relevant only for those who actually lived through them but without hortatory significance for us who came after them. This unsound notion radically undermines the conception of Scripture as the inspired record of God's revelation to us, given us for our guidance and correction.

Far safer is the rule laid down for us in the VIIth Article of Religion,^{xiii} namely that even after the inauguration of the new and everlasting Covenant brought into being through Our Lord's Incarnation, Christians remain bound by the moral and spiritual precepts of the Old Testament.

Among those precepts, it behooves us to remember that even leaders such as Moses and Aaron, leaders chosen by God Himself for the Offices they filled, were not thereby exempted from giving account to God for their performance of their Offices. If God's own Prophet and that original High Priest could be judged and found wanting for such failures before God, are not we, too, who are so much less favored than they were, likewise at risk of being sanctioned for our own shortcomings?

And so, faced with that reality, would we not benefit from being reminded each and every morning in the *Venite* [*venn-EE-tay*] of how God dealt with those two otherwise great men whom He had chosen to lead His people?

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September 26, 2010.

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

ⁱⁱ *Exodus 5: 1-9, 19—6: 1 (KJV).*

ⁱⁱⁱ *Hebrews 3: 1-19 (KJV).*

^{iv} *Hebrews 3: 7-11 (RSV).*

^v *HERBERT G. MAY AND BRUCE M. METZGER, THE NEW OXFORD ANNOTATED BIBLE WITH THE APOCRYPHA, Revised Standard Version 1455 (Oxford University Press 1977).*

^{vi} *Vv. 8-11.*

^{vii} *Vv. 9 & 13.*

^{viii} *Exodus 17: 1-7; Numbers 20: 1-13.*

^{ix} *St. John 4: 7-15.*

^x *Numbers 20: 12.*

^{xi} *Psalms 95: 11; cf. Hebrews 3: 11 (RSV).*

^{xii} *MASSEY HAMILTON SHEPHERD, JR., THE OXFORD AMERICAN PRAYER BOOK COMMENTARY 8-9 (Oxford University Press 1950).*

^{xiii} *“Of the Old Testament”, Articles of Religion, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 604 (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*

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