

Sermon for Morning Prayer The Eighteenth Sunday After Trinity

Lessons:ⁱ

First Lesson: Here beginneth the fourth Verse of the eighth Chapter of Amos.ⁱⁱ

“Hear this, O ye that swallow up the needy, even to make the poor of the land to fail, Saying, When will the new moon be gone, that we may sell corn? and the sabbath, that we may set forth wheat, making the ephahⁱⁱⁱ [EE-fah] small, and the shekel^{iv} [SCHECK-ull] great, and falsifying the balances by deceit?^v That we may buy the poor for silver, and the needy for a pair of shoes; yea, and sell the refuse of the wheat? The Lord hath sworn by the excellency of Jacob, Surely I will never forget any of their works. Shall not the land tremble for this, and every one mourn that dwelleth therein? and it shall rise up wholly as a flood; and it shall be cast out and drowned, as by the flood of Egypt. And it shall come to pass in that day, saith the Lord God, that I will cause the sun to go down at noon, and I will darken the earth in the clear day: And I will turn your feasts into mourning, and all your songs into lamentation; and I will bring up sackcloth upon all loins, and baldness upon every head; and I will make it as the mourning of an only son, and the end thereof as a bitter day.

“Behold, the days come, saith the Lord God, that I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord: And they shall wander from sea to sea, and from the north even to the east, they shall run to and fro to seek the word of the Lord, and shall not find it.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the thirty-seventh verse of the seventh Chapter of the Gospel According to St. John.^{vi}

“. . . In the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried, saying, If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink. He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water. (But this spake he of the Spirit, which they

that believe on him should receive: for the Holy Ghost was not yet given; because that Jesus was not yet glorified.)

“Many of the people therefore, when they heard this saying, said, Of a truth this is the Prophet. Others said, This is the Christ. But some said, Shall Christ come out of Galilee? Hath not the scripture said, That Christ cometh of the seed of David, and out of the town of Bethlehem, where David was? So there was a division among the people because of him. And some of them would have taken him; but no man laid hands on him.

“Then came the officers to the chief priests and Pharisees; and they said unto them, Why have ye not brought him? The officers answered, Never man spake like this man. Then answered them the Pharisees, Are ye also deceived? Have any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed on him? But this people who knoweth not the law are cursed. Nicodemus saith unto them, (he that came to Jesus by night, being one of them,) Doth our law judge any man, before it hear him, and know what he doeth? They answered and said unto him, Art thou also of Galilee? Search, and look: for out of Galilee ariseth no prophet. And every man went unto his own house.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the First Lesson: “Behold, the days come, saith the Lord God, that I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord: And they shall wander from sea to sea, and from the north even to the east, they shall run to and fro to seek the word of the Lord, and shall not find it.”^{vii} In the Name of the Father, and of the ☩ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Developement:

Repeatedly, the Old Testament prophets spoke to a recurring human problem: the exploitation of the weak and powerless by the strong and powerful. In their society, as in ours and as in all those that have existed between their time and ours, weakness and powerlessness were usually associated with a dearth of this world’s possessions, that is,

with poverty, and strength and power were usually accompanied by a surfeit of this world's produce, that is, with wealth.

Today's First Lesson gives a very concrete example of this sort of exploitation. It pictures the merchants, who were forbidden to trade on the Sabbath day, impatiently counting the hours until they could resume buying and selling. It also pictures them as eagerly awaiting the resumption of using short measures for the grain they would sell their customers and overly-heavy weights for the silver they would demand as the price of that grain. In other words, they were simultaneously overcharging and under delivering, thus cheating their customers at both ends of their transactions.

The dishonest merchants got a way with this because the poor did not come to the marketplace bearing their own measures or weights. Doubtless, when the market inspectors came by, those merchants displayed a second set of measures and weights that conformed to the official standards, or perhaps they just relied on bribing the inspectors. Either way, the result was to harm the weakest among God's subjects.

So whenever the ancient Hebrews lost their moral compass and began to drift aimlessly upon the sea of their own self-regard, so that God had to send a prophet to upbraid them and to recall them to the life of their Covenant with Him, a major theme of that prophet was usually the prevalence of injustice, in particular the prevalence of injustice by the well-placed and well-fixed toward the helpless.

The Jewish thinkers were especially concerned with this particular form of sin because it affronts the moral order as established by God. It is a violation of the principle of stewardship God laid down for us in the first Chapter of Genesis, where we are told that He gave us dominion over the created world in order to use it wisely in His service.

Thus the misuse of the things with which God had entrusted us, in order to damage others whom God loves just as much as He loves us, and whom we are therefore commanded to love as His people, is a deliberate flouting of God's will. In misusing His gifts to us, it makes Him an accomplice in our criminal conduct, for which reason it is a form of blasphemy.

The Hebrews had a deep revulsion from this particular type of sacrilege. The basic precepts underlying their relationship with God are set forth in the Ten Commandments and one of these ten is devoted entirely to a specialized instance of our using God to injure our fellows. The Ninth Commandment says “Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor”,^{viii} which in modern English might better be rendered, “Thou shalt not commit perjury in a court of law”.^{ix}

The reason for this prohibition is that judicial testimony was, and still is, given upon oath. If one examines the basic form of that oath, one sees that originally it took a form along the lines of, “As God is my witness” or “May God strike me down if I tell not the truth”. A remnant of that survives into our own time as “So help me God”.

Thus the oath-taker is calling on God as a witness to and guarantor of his veracity. Thus, too, if he lies, he is making God a party to that lie, perverting the source of all justice by using it to commit an injustice. That is why perjury is a form of blasphemy – of denying an essential attribute of God’s – as well as of sacrilege – polluting sacred things by using them for improper purposes.

For this reason, the ancient Jews had such a horror of perjury that they preserved one particularly egregious example of it among their Scriptures. In the First Book of the Kings we read how the apostate King Ahab desired to possess the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite^x but Naboth believed it was a religious duty not to alienate his family inheritance because it was a gift from God. Thus he, refused to sell his vineyard at any price.^{xi}

Ahab had married a Phoenician princess, whose name has become a byword for an evil, scheming woman. This Queen Jezebel arranged to get her husband the vineyard he coveted by falsely accusing Naboth of blasphemy, convicting him on the testimony of two purchased witnesses, and having him put to death.

This judicial murder, committed in God’s name, so contemptuously trampled upon the conditions of Israel’s Covenant with God that the great prophet Elijah confronted Ahab and announced to him

God's judgment upon him and upon Jezebel. As for Ahab, the kingdom would be stripped from him and his line would be extinguished. As for Jezebel, she had so affronted the very land of Israel that she would not be permitted to pollute its soil by being buried within it. And as we are told in the Second Book of the Kings, both of these predictions came to pass.^{xii}

Conclusion:

So much were the Hebrews revolted by this blatant oppression of the innocent that the names of Ahab and Jezebel remain current in our day as synonyms for evil. And their history reminds us that God takes no light view of those who mistreat His people. As Our Lord reminded us, as we deal with the poor, the sick, the shut-ins and the needy, so we deal with Him.^{xiii}

So long as we recall the words of God, as related to us both by Amos in today's First Lesson and as repeated elsewhere in Scripture, so long can we not forget that God demands that we protect and care for the weakest and neediest among us. If we forget that simple truth, then we, like those Amos addressed, will suffer a visitation from God:

"Behold, the days come, saith the Lord God, that I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord: And they shall wander from sea to sea, and from the north even to the east, they shall run to and fro to seek the word of the Lord, and shall not find it."^{xiv}

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The Rev'd Canon John A. Hollister^{xv}
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ⁱ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxxiv (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*

ⁱⁱ Amos 8: 4-12 (KJV).

ⁱⁱⁱ A unit of dry volume, equivalent to approximately a half-bushel in U.S. measure, Gordon B. Duncan, *Measures and Money*, in CHARLES L. LAMON, ED., *THE INTERPRETER'S ONE-VOLUME COMMENTARY ON THE BIBLE* 1285 (Nashville: Abingdon Press 1971), or other sources say it was approximately six gallons, HERBERT G. MAY AND BRUCE M. METZGER, EDS., *THE NEW OXFORD ANNOTATED BIBLE WITH THE APOCRYPHA* 829 (Oxford University Press 1977).

^{iv} Approximately four tenths of an avoirdupois ounce, Duncan, *supra* note 3, MAY AND METZGER, *supra* note 3, which in this context would have been weighed out in silver bullion as a precursor of coined money.

^v By illicitly decreasing the measure of the goods to be sold and improperly increasing the weights they used to determine how much silver the customer would pay, the merchants were doubly defrauding the public, in antiquity's version of "the butcher's thumb on the scales".

^{vi} St. John 7: 37-53 (KJV).

^{vii} Amos 8: 11-12 (KJV).

^{viii} Exodus 20: 16 (KJV).

^{ix} Hywel R. Jones, *Exodus* in D. GUTHRIE AND J. A. MOTYER, EDS., *THE NEW BIBLE COMMENTARY REVISED*, 3RD ED. 132 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1970).

^x I Kings 19: 1-16.

^{xi} Cf. Leviticus 25: 10, 25: 13-17, 25: 23-24, & 25: 34.

^{xii} II Kings 9: 21-36.

^{xiii} St. Matthew 25: 35, 45; cf. James 1: 27.

^{xiv} Amos 8: 11-12 (KJV).

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