

SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYERⁱ

The Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity

Lessons:ⁱⁱ

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the fifth Chapter of the Fifth Book of Moses, called Deuteronomy.ⁱⁱⁱ

“And Moses called all Israel, and said unto them, Hear, O Israel, the statutes and judgments which I speak in your ears this day, that ye may learn them, and keep, and do them. The LORD our God made a covenant with us in Horeb. The LORD made not this covenant with our fathers, but with us, even us, who are all of us here alive this day. The LORD talked with you face to face in the mount out of the midst of the fire, (I stood between the LORD and you at that time, to shew [SHOW] you the word of the LORD: for ye were afraid by reason of the fire, and went not up into the mount;) saying,

“I am the LORD thy God, which brought thee out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage. Thou shalt have none other gods before me. Thou shalt not make thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the waters beneath the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself unto them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me, And shewing [SHOWING] mercy unto thousands of them that love me and keep my commandments. Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain: for the LORD will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain. Keep the sabbath day to sanctify it, as the LORD thy God hath commanded thee. Six days thou shalt labour, and do all thy work: But the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, nor thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thine ox, nor thine ass, nor any of thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates; that thy manservant and thy maidservant may rest as well as thou. And remember that thou wast a servant in the land of Egypt, and that the LORD thy God brought thee out thence through a mighty hand and by a stretched out arm: therefore the LORD thy God commanded thee to keep the sabbath day.

“Honour thy father and thy mother, as the LORD thy God hath commanded thee; that thy days may be prolonged, and that it may go well with thee, in the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee. Thou shalt not kill. Neither shalt thou commit adultery. Neither shalt thou steal. Neither shalt thou bear false witness against thy neighbour. Neither shalt thou desire thy neighbour’s wife, neither shalt thou covet thy neighbour’s house, his field, or his manservant, or his maidservant, his ox, or his ass, or any thing that is thy neighbour’s.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the thirty-fourth Verse of the twenty-second Chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew.^{iv}

“But when the Pharisees had heard that he had put the Sadducees to silence, they were gathered together. Then one of them, which was a lawyer, asked him a question, tempting him, and saying, Master, which is the great commandment in the law? Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.

“While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them, Saying, What think ye of Christ? whose son is he? They say unto him, The Son of David. He saith [SETH] unto them, How then doth David in spirit call him Lord, saying, The LORD said unto my Lord, Sit thou on my right hand, till I make thine enemies thy footstool? If David then call him Lord, how is he his son? And no man was able to answer him a word, neither durst any man from that day forth ask him any more questions.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “Master, which is the great commandment in the law? Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like

unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”^v

Introduction:

Biblical theologians talk about something they call “Salvation History”, which simply means the history of God’s dealings with humanity. It is called “*Salvation* History” because, of course, the single most important theme of that history is, first, how God created mankind in fellowship with Himself and then, after His experience of our disobedience in the Fall in the Garden of Eden, how God carefully planned and nurtured our return to a state of grace with Him, that is, how He made it possible for us to be “saved” from the separation our first ancestors brought upon us.

Theme:

One of the most basic concepts in this Salvation History is that of a *covenant*. A covenant is simply a formal agreement, such as a contract or a treaty, and even today lawyers refer to the specific undertakings in a contract as “the covenants” contained in that contract.

What is unique about the Jewish and Christian experiences of God, what they share with no other world religion, and even with no other monotheistic religion, is that their most important dealings with God have taken the form of these *covenants* or agreements. And just as in any other contract or treaty, in these covenants between God and humanity, each party has undertaken some defined burdens or obligations toward the other party in order to receive some other, and similarly defined, benefits from that other party.

Development:

Actually, one can quite legitimately read the Jewish Bible that is our Old Testament as the story of not just one covenant between mankind and God but of a series of covenants, each of which incorporated within it the earlier ones—most of which had been broken on mankind’s side, which was why they needed to be renewed or

amended—and then went on to make any needed updates or modifications to the man-God relationship.

Thus, for example, after Adam and Eve’s disobedience destroyed their fellowship with God, so that God sent them out of Eden into the much less favorable outside world, and mankind’s continued moral depravity caused God to visit upon it the disaster of the Flood, He signified the restoration of good relations by offering a covenant to Noah^{vi} under which Noah offered worship to God and God promised that never again would He destroy the whole earth.

When mankind had grown and developed to the point where its relationship to God could advance another step, this Noahide Covenant was renewed in God’s covenant with Abraham. Under this renewal, Abraham agreed to relocate himself and his clan to a new territory that God had assigned to them and God agreed to prosper Abraham and his progeny.^{vii} In acting upon God’s promise to him, Abraham implicitly accepted this agreement and, in consequence, God promised that Abraham’s descendants would occupy Abraham’s new territory as its own, safe from all comers.^{viii}

This Abramic Covenant was renewed with Abraham’s son Isaac^{ix} and his grandson Jacob.^x Then, after the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt, God promised them through Moses that they would escape from Egyptian captivity^{xi} and when they had done so, He renewed and expanded the Covenant through His promises to Moses upon Mount Sinai,^{xii} as we see in today’s First Lesson.

Throughout the remainder of the Old Testament period, there were other “tweaks” to this Covenant relationship, usually after the Israelites had violated their part of the bargain, God had punished them for their disobedience, and then the relationship had been reestablished. However, whichever iteration of the Old Testament Covenants we choose to examine, all of them share three essential features.

First, they are true Covenants or agreements. The pagan peoples that surrounded the Israelites related to their various gods much as citizens usually relate to American city political machines: bribery in return for favors. The Israelites, in contrast, had a relationship that,

although it was between parties of very different levels of power, still implied real respect and recognition on both sides.

Second, the essential obligation assumed by the Israelites was to take God as their sole God. This, the very first of the Ten Commandments, implies some further things, such as that they will worship God and will respect and obey His moral and legal directives to them, but that worship and obedience are, in essence, simply implications of that one, over-arching fact: the Hebrews were to have one God and only one God, to the exclusion of all others.

In this exclusivity the Old Testament relationship between God and humanity prefigured the New Testament concept of monogamous marriage and, therefore, also foreshadowed the later metaphor of Christ as the Bridegroom and of His Church as the Bride.

Third, the essential obligation assumed by God was to care for, preserve, and protect His people. In this way, this Old Testament Covenant was modeled on the ancient agreements between Near Eastern Kings of Kings and their subject peoples, kingdoms, and cities.

Naturally, there was an element of self-interest in the Israelites' adherence to this Covenant. Theirs was a "carrot and stick" approach. The "carrot" or bait was that they wanted the benefits that God had promised them and that no other ancient people or society could be assured of receiving. The "stick" or threat was that they very much wished to avoid the punishments that God had demonstrated very conclusively that He was quite capable of handing out.

This brings us to the transition between the Old Testament and the New one, and it is at this point that we part company with our Jewish brethren, for they believe that the Noahide-Abrahmic-Mosaic Covenant still governs relations between God and human kind, while we believe that, just as happened several times in Old Testament times, that old Covenant has, once again, been renewed and updated.

For us Christians, of course, this New Covenant came in the form of Christ's Incarnation. With that event, God came among us in human form, unlike the previous editions of the Covenant under which God

remained above His created world and we remained very much within that world. Thus, previously, humanity had no prospect either of surmounting the ultimate limit to physical existence represented by the death of our bodies or of transcending this physical plane to live in God's presence. With the Incarnation of Christ, however, both of these expansions of the scope of our existence became entirely possible.

Given the qualitative nature of that expansion, it should then come as no surprise whatever that the essential motivations behind this Covenant—what lawyers would call “the consideration for the contract”—likewise altered. Before, the people of the Old Israel obeyed the demands laid upon them because they desired the benefits of having a truly effective God, one quite unlike the dumb and unresponsive idols their neighbors worshipped, and because they feared the consequences of disobedience.

Now, however, the motive of the people of the New Israel was less like a commercial transaction and more like a family relationship. They knew, and we know, that God loves them, and us, like the father of a family. At their highest and best, they, and we, respond to that love with our own love of Him.

And that mutual love is the true consideration for the New and Everlasting Covenant^{xiii} that Christ inaugurated between God and us. In lawyer's terms, we have moved from “valuable consideration” to “good consideration”.

This is what is addressed by the verses from today's Second Lesson that I selected as the text for this sermon and that are the Summary of the Law^{xiv} that we repeat nearly every time we celebrate the Sacrament of the Eucharist:

“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”^{xv}

Conclusion:

Our New Testament relationship with God can be summarized very simply. As we are reminded in the Comfortable Words that also accompany every celebration of the Eucharist, “So God loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son, to the end that all that believe in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”^{xvi}

But if God loves us to such an incredible degree that He would sacrifice His Son for us, then the only reasonable response we can make to that love is to love Him in return, to the fullest extent possible to us. But—and this is the conundrum Our Lord poses to us in today’s Gospel—if we truly love God, then we cannot at the same time despise those others of His creatures whom He loves just as much as He loves us. So if we love God, then we must likewise love those others who are equally His and who are our neighbors.

We cannot pay God back for His love for us, so all we can do to demonstrate our gratitude to Him is, as the current jargon has it, to “pay that love forward” to others.

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October 23, 2011

ⁱ “Any set of Psalms and Lessons appointed for the evening of any day may be read at the morning service, and any set of morning Psalms and Lessons may be read in the evening.” Concerning the Service of the Church, *THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER* viii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

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

ⁱⁱⁱ *Deuteronomy* 5:1-21 (KJV).

^{iv} *St. Mark* 22:34-end (KJV).

^v *St. Matthew* 22:36-40 (KJV). Cf. *St. Luke* 10:25-28.

^{vi} *Genesis* 8:15-22.

^{vii} *Genesis* 12:1-3.

^{viii} *Genesis* 15:1-21.

^{ix} *Genesis* 17:19.

^x *Genesis* 28:13-15.

^{xi} *Exodus* 6:4-8.

^{xii} *Exodus 34:28.*

^{xiii} *Hebrews 13:20.*

^{xiv} *The Order for The Administration of the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 69 (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*

^{xv} *St. Matthew 22:37-40 (KJV). Cf. St. Luke 10:25-28.*

^{xvi} *St. John 3:16; The Order for The Administration of the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 76 (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*

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