

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER

The First Sunday after Trinity

Lessons:ⁱ

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the twenty-third Verse of the twenty-third Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah.ⁱⁱ

“... Am I a God at hand, saith [SETH] the LORD, and not a God afar off? Can any hide himself in secret places that I shall not see him? saith [SETH] the LORD. Do not I fill heaven and earth? saith [SETH] the LORD. I have heard what the prophets said, that prophesy lies in my name, saying, I have dreamed, I have dreamed. How long shall this be in the heart of the prophets that prophesy lies? yea, they are prophets of the deceit of their own heart; Which think to cause my people to forget my name by their dreams which they tell every man to his neighbour, as their fathers have forgotten my name for Baal [BUH-awl]. The prophet that hath a dream, let him tell a dream; and he that hath my word, let him speak my word faithfully. What is the chaff to the wheat? saith [SETH] the LORD. Is not my word like as a fire? saith [SETH] the LORD; and like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces? Therefore, behold, I am against the prophets, saith [SETH] the LORD, that steal my words every one from his neighbour. Behold, I am against the prophets, saith [SETH] the LORD, that use their tongues, and say, He saith [SETH]. Behold, I am against them that prophesy false dreams, saith [SETH] the LORD, and do tell them, and cause my people to err [UR] by their lies, and by their lightness; yet I sent them not, nor commanded them: therefore they shall not profit this people at all, saith [SETH] the LORD.

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the thirteenth Verse of the seventh Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Matthew.ⁱⁱⁱ

“Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.

“....

“Not every one that saith [SETH] unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.

“Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock. And every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it. And it came to pass, when Jesus had ended these sayings, the people were astonished at his doctrine: For he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the First Lesson: “The prophet that hath a dream, let him tell a dream; and he that hath my word, let him speak my word faithfully.”^{iv}

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

Introduction:

As sometimes happens in the 1943 Lectionary, a portion of the assigned passage of Scripture has been deleted from that Lectionary’s prescription for today’s Second Lesson. Sometimes these elisions are made to keep the passage as read in the service focused on one consistent theme but in this case, the portion omitted actually bears some significant relationship to, and actually introduces, the famous Verse with which the assigned portion picks up, a Verse that obviously refers to false prophets: “Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall

enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven.”^v

Let us therefore consider that omitted portion:

“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornes, or figs from thistles? So, every sound tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears evil fruit. A sound tree cannot bear evil fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will know them by their fruits.”^{vi}

One would have thought that in 1943, while the Second World War was raging and the United States was engaged in a death struggle with the lying ideologies of Fascism, Nazism, and the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, the subject of false teachers and false teachings would have seemed one that should be explored as completely as possible instead of being given the Reader’s Digest abridgement treatment.

Theme:

For the false teachers, and their false teachings, are ever with us. For more than thirty years, or ever since 1976, the “Continuing Anglican Churches” have struggled against the “official” Lambeth Communion’s ever-increasing tendencies to depart from Anglicanism’s traditional *epistemology*, that is, from its historic understandings about what truth is, where truth is to be found, and how propositions are to be tested to see if they be true.

Since approximately the year 2000, the attacks on the classic understandings about truth have only intensified. We are now engaged in a form of cultural warfare, in which those who stand up for what their grandparents believed to be good, right, moral, and true are demonized as unenlightened bigots and obstructionist enemies of social progress

while those who a generation or two ago would have been ostracized as oral imbeciles are held up as paragons of virtue and models of proper behavior.

Under these circumstances, it is ever more vital that we should be equipped to identify both false teachers and their false teachings and to be able to explain to others, such as our own children, how to do the same.

Development:

1. We must always examine and evaluate the source a teacher claims for his teachings.

Jeremiah warns us against prophets who claim to have received messages from God in dreams:

“I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in my name, saying, ‘I have dreamed, I have dreamed!’ How long shall there be lies in the heart of the prophets who prophesy lies, and who prophesy the deceit of their own heart, who think to make my people forget my name by their dreams which they tell one another, even as their fathers forgot my name for Ba’al [BUH-awl]? Let the prophet who has a dream tell a dream, but let him who has my word speak my word faithfully.... Therefore, behold, I am against the prophets, says the LORD, who steal my words one from another.... Behold, I am against those who prophesy lying dreams, says the LORD, and who tell them and lead my people astray by their lies and their recklessness, when I did not send them or charge them; so they do not profit this people at all, says the LORD.”^{vii}

In both the Old Testament and the New, there are occasional reports of actual messages from God being transmitted in dreams.^{viii} Dreams, however, are not capable of being verified by those to whom they are related, so they are easily used as the basis for false claims of divine inspiration or authorization. Thus many highly important revelations from God are delivered in ways that provide witnesses to attest to their authenticity, as when Saul’s fellow travelers heard Christ’s voice speaking to him on the road to Damascus.^{ix}

So we must always be alert to Jeremiah's warning, and examine closely the sources for any inspiration or divine commission claimed by those who would have us listen to and heed their messages.

2. True teachers and true teachings are always consistent with what the Church has always taught.

God is the God of Truth and Truth is never inconsistent. Thus any message that is actually from God will fit within the same overall pattern as do other messages and teachings known to be from God. Further, as the creation story in Genesis teaches us, God is the God of order, not of chaos.

Please note that this does not mean that in the past, God's directives concerning certain subsidiary matters were not expanded and developed beyond the forms in which they were originally developed, or even in some cases were abandoned to be replaced by other directives. This certainly happened when God's Covenant with the Old Testament Church was expanded and perfected into His Covenant with the New Testament Church.

That, however, was an extraordinary event, predicated upon His final Revelation of Himself in the Person of His Incarnate Son. This event will not be repeated and therefore no similar change in perspective will occur in the period between Christ's Ascension and His Coming in Glory to judge the world.

Furthermore, even the changes in God's commands that occurred at that one time were all either related to *cultic* or *ethnic* distinctions between the Jews and the peoples that surrounded them, such as the abandonment of the Jews' particularistic rules of dress and diet,^x or constituted more rigorous applications of the moral laws God had taught to the Jews, as when Jesus prohibited the previously widespread practice of divorce.^{xi}

In no case did the advent of Christ relax the moral law of the Old Testament, which continues in force for Christians even under the new dispensation.

So any time we are offered a new teaching, or any proposition regarding the Faith, it must first pass two related “sniff tests”. First, does it confirm what we already know to be true or does it deny what has already been accepted as true? Second, will it contribute to good order and decency in the Church, in the world, or in our lives, or will it increase the disorderliness and uncertainty around us?

3. Anglicanism has a sound, traditional set of criteria for judging what is and what is not to be accepted as a legitimate part of the Faith.

Since Richard Hooker wrote his classic work, THE LAWS OF ECCLESIASTICAL POLITY, Anglicans have used an ascending pyramid – perhaps better, a *descending* pyramid -- of three principles to test the legitimacy of any new proposition.

First, they ask themselves, “Can this proposal be ‘proved’ (tested) from Scripture? That is, is it actually to be found expressly set out in Scripture? Or, if it is not, is it at least supported by other principles that are clearly to be found in Scripture? At the very least, is it consistent with what we find in Scripture?”

Only if the answer cannot thus be found in the pigeonhole labeled “Scripture” do Anglicans look into another pigeonhole, one that is labeled “Tradition”. Here, “Tradition” means “That which has been handed on by the whole Church”. This was put another way by St. Vincent of Lehrs: “The Catholic Faith is that which has been believed always, everywhere, and by all.”

In a way similar to the one they use regarding Scripture, Anglicans ask themselves, “Can this proposal be ‘proved’ (tested) from Tradition? That is, is it actually to be found expressly set out in parts of the Tradition that are already accepted without dispute? Or, if it is not, is it at least supported by other principles that are clearly to be found in such unquestioned Tradition? At the very least, is it consistent with what we find generally in the Tradition, particularly in the seven Œcumenical Councils and in the Fathers of the Church?”

Finally, only if we have not found the answer in Scripture or Tradition do we look to our God-given human Reason. By this, we do not mean some arcane, minority-held body of special information or some technical methods of investigation or analysis. We certainly do not mean that one of the revisionists' favorite sources of authority, "the best modern scholarship", by which they actually mean "the currently most fashionable academic fads".

By Reason we mean, simply, that ordinary common sense that men and women of normal prudence bring to bear on the usual affairs of everyday life. If the proponent of a new idea has difficulty explaining it in terms that a person stopped on the street can understand, that is at least somewhat suspicious, because most of God's commands are intended to govern our daily lives, not extreme and uncommon situations.

This is why Our Lord cast His own teachings in the form of simple images and vivid parables, capable of being understood by all His hearers, such as His image in today's Second Lesson of the contrasting fates of two houses, one built on bedrock and one built on sand. No Ivy League professor of architecture or engineering is needed to explain the significance of that one.

Conclusion:

So remember Our Lord's words about those who claim to be teaching and ministering in His Name:

"Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity."^{xii}

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May 25, 2008.

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

ⁱⁱ *Jeremiah 23:23-32 (KJV).*

ⁱⁱⁱ *St. Matthew 7:13-14, 21-29 (KJV).*

^{iv} *Jeremiah 23:28a (KJV).*

^v *St. Matthew 7:21 (KJV).*

^{vi} *St. Matthew 7:15-20 (RSV).*

^{vii} *Jeremiah 23:26-28a, 30, 32 (RSV).*

^{viii} *E.g., St. Matthew 1:20, 2:12-13, 2:19.*

^{ix} *Acts 9:7.*

^x *Cf., Acts 10:1—11:18.*

^{xi} *St. Matthew 5:31-32, 19:3-10; St. Luke 16:18.*

^{xii} *St. Matthew 7:21-23 (KJV).*

^{xiii} *Priest in Charge, St. James of Jerusalem Anglican Catholic Church, Erie, PA.
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