

Sermon for Morning Prayer The First Sunday after Trinity

Lessons:ⁱ

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the eighth Verse of the fifth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.ⁱⁱ

“Woe unto them that join house to house, that lay field to field, till there be no place, that they may be placed alone in the midst of the earth! In mine ears said the LORD of hosts, Of a truth many houses shall be desolate, even great and fair, without inhabitant. Yea, ten acres of vineyard shall yield one bath,ⁱⁱⁱ and the seed of an homer^{iv} [HO-mer] shall yield an ephah^v [EE-fah].

“Woe unto them that rise up early in the morning, that they may follow strong drink; that continue until night, till wine inflame them! And the harp, and the viol, the tabret, and pipe, and wine, are in their feasts: but they regard not the work of the *Lord*, neither consider the operation of his hands.

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“... Woe unto them that draw iniquity with cords of vanity, and sin as it were with a cart rope: That say, Let him make speed, and hasten his work, that we may see it: and let the counsel of the Holy One of Israel draw nigh and come, that we may know it! Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter! Woe unto them that are wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight! Woe unto them that are mighty to drink wine, and men of strength to mingle strong drink: Which justify the wicked for reward, and take away the righteousness of the righteous from him! Therefore as the fire devoureth the stubble, and the flame consumeth the chaff, so their root shall be as rottenness, and their blossom shall go up as dust: because they have cast away the law of the Lord of hosts, and despised the word of the Holy One of Israel.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the fifth Chapter of the General Epistle of James.^{vi}

“Go to now, ye rich men, weep and howl for your miseries that shall come upon you. Your riches are corrupted, and your garments are motheaten. Your gold

and silver is cankered; and the rust of them shall be a witness against you, and shall eat your flesh as it were fire. Ye have heaped treasure together for the last days. Behold, the hire of the labourers who have reaped down your fields, which is of you kept back by fraud, crieth: and the cries of them which have reaped are entered into the ears of the Lord of sabaoth. Ye have lived in pleasure on the earth, and been wanton; ye have nourished your hearts, as in a day of slaughter. Ye have condemned and killed the just; and he doth not resist you. Be patient therefore, brethren, unto the coming of the Lord. Behold, the husbandman waiteth for the precious fruit of the earth, and hath long patience for it, until he receive the early and latter rain.^{vii} Be ye also patient; stablish your hearts: for the coming of the Lord draweth nigh. Grudge not one against another, brethren, lest ye be condemned: behold, the judge standeth before the door. Take, my brethren, the prophets, who have spoken in the name of the Lord, for an example of suffering affliction, and of patience. Behold, we count them happy which endure. Ye have heard of the patience of Job, and have seen the end of the Lord; that the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy. But above all things, my brethren, swear not, neither by heaven, neither by the earth, neither by any other oath: but let your yea be yea; and your nay, nay; lest ye fall into condemnation. Is any among you afflicted? let him pray. Is any merry? let him sing psalms. Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord: And the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him. Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much. Elias [**Ee-LYE-uss**] was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain: and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit. Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him; Let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death, and shall hide a multitude of sins.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.”^{viii} In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Introduction:

In the second half of the Eighth Century B.C., Isaiah wrote at least the first third of the book now attributed to him.^{ix} His purpose was to rallying the Jewish people to a renewed religious and social integrity, against the background of the ever-looming threat from the expansionist Assyrian Empire just to the east of Palestine. The portion that forms today's First Lesson is dedicated to a catalogue of the woes that will befall the people through the arrogance and self-absorption of their leaders.

Isaiah uses the rhetorical device of symbolizing the entirety of the ancient "chattering classes" by enumerating and excoriating three of their typical self-destructive attitudes. Thus he depicts those who, in our own time, we would term extortioners, particularly thieves of others' lands, or wastrels of those lands; playboys, or those who are devoted to personal indulgence; and scoffers,^x those who are preoccupied with their own self-assigned importance. Do you hear any echoes here of the Hollywood actors and actresses, the rock musicians and the sports stars, who seem to mould most opinions and tastes in our own society?

Warnings such as Isaiah's may be heeded for a time but then are usually forgotten and the evils that occasioned them return to plague society. Thus his denunciations are paralleled some 750 years later by those of St. James, in the portion of his Epistle which forms today's Second Lesson.

Theme:

To the societal ills identified by Isaiah, James offers a uniquely Christian set of prescriptions. To stand against the corrosive influences around us, we must uphold justice, practice patience, and devote ourselves to upright Christian living and to the service of others.

Development:

1. Justice.

When Isaiah castigates the extortioners and misappropriators of others' lands, his words call to mind the harrowing story of Naboth's judicial murder and

dispossession of his vineyard by the evil Philistine Jezebel, wife of the weak and apostate King Ahab:^{xi}

“Woe to those who join house to house,
 who add field to field,
 until there is no more room,
 and you are made to dwell alone
 in the midst of the land.”^{xii}

James echoes this theme of wealthy landowners’ oppression of their poorer neighbors in these words:

“Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.”^{xiii} Thus he reminds his readers that those who abuse their positions to wreak harm on others must live in fear of the Lord’s visiting them with their just deserts, as He so conspicuously punished the transgressions of Ahab and Jezebel.^{xiv}

2. Patience.

Isaiah denounces the playboys and drunkards, who are concerned only with their own self-indulgence:

“Woe to those who rise early in the morning,
 that they may run after strong drink,
 who tarry late into the evening
 till wine inflames them!
 They have lyre and harp
 timbrel and flute and wine at their feasts;
 but they do not regard the deeds of the LORD,
 or see the work of his hands.”^{xv}

James uses very similar terms of warning,^{xvi} but then he offers a remedy for the harms caused by these miscreants as well as hope for even their redemption. He says:

“Be patient, therefore, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. Behold, the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient over it until it receives the early and the late rain.”^{xvii}

For James, this “waiting on the Lord” for aid is no mere figure of speech. He reminds his readers that quite ordinary people have endured tremendous adversity because they trusted in God’s sovereign providence:

“As an example of suffering and patience, brethren, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Behold, we call those happy who were steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.”^{xviii}

3. Christian living and service.

Finally, Isaiah excoriates the scoffers and mockers of true values and the Lord’s teachings, those who sing to us the seductive song of the Spirit of the Age and urge us to turn deaf ears to the hymns of the Holy Spirit:

“Woe to those who call evil good and good evil,
 who put darkness for light
 and light for darkness,
 who put bitter for sweet
 and sweet for bitter!
 Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes,
 and shrewd in their own sight!”^{xix}

James counsels us to have faith in God’s loving care for us, care that is often exhibited through the presence and actions of other faithful followers of Him:

“Is any one among you suffering? Let him pray. Is any cheerful? Let him sing praise. Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.”^{xx}

Conclusion:

For anyone who has seen the workings of the Church's healing ministry, there can be no more powerful argument than James' concluding paragraphs. Some of us have seen people who were beyond the aid of normal medicine nevertheless comforted, alleviated, and sometimes recovered, by no other agencies than prayer and the Anointing of the Sick.

We who have experienced that know that James was telling the simple truth, and can draw from it the obvious conclusion: If God can heal physical ailments by the interposition of His Power, and He most certainly can do so and does do so, then He can equally easily deal with all the other myriad ills that beset us in the course of our daily lives. Of course, this is nothing but the same message that Christ demonstrated over and over during His earthly ministry: The people could see Him healing the sick, casting out demons, and performing other miracles that showed His mastery over the physical world, so those who observed Him could believe that He has similar power over the unseen metaphysical world.

So, like the witnesses to Christ's healing miracles, we who have experienced the continuing healing miracles in the Church, of which St. James wrote, can believe that the Lord can also give us the justice and patience that will counteract the economic and political oppression, cultural self-absorption and selfishness, and false prophets and their false values, against which Isaiah warned and which we see are so prevalent around us today.

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The Rev'd Canon John A. Hollister
June 14, 2009.

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

ⁱⁱ *Isaiah 5: 8-12, 18-24* (KJV).

ⁱⁱⁱ A unit of liquid volume, equivalent to approximately five wine (U.S.) gallons or four Imperial gallons. 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). Other sources say it was approximately six (wine) gallons, HERBERT G. MAY AND BRUCE M. METZGER, EDS., *THE NEW OXFORD ANNOTATED BIBLE WITH THE APOCRYPHA* 829 (Oxford University Press 1977).

^{iv} *A unit of dry volume, originally equivalent to an assload of grain, by this time approximately five bushels in U.S. measure, Duncan, op cit. 1283-85. MAY AND METZGER, supra, say it was approximately 6.5 bushels.*

^v *A unit of dry volume, equivalent to approximately a half-bushel in U.S. measure, Duncan, op cit. 1285, or six (wine) gallons, MAY AND METZGER, supra.*

^{vi} *James 5: 1-20 (KJV).*

^{vii} *These two periodic annual periods of rainfall bracketed the growing season in Palestine and were essential to a successful crop.*

^{viii} *James 5: 16b (KJV).*

^{ix} *Opinions differ about whether Isaiah himself wrote all sixty-six chapters that comprise the present book but no one seriously disputes that he was responsible for at least Chapters 1-39, which includes today's First Lesson.*

^x *Derek Kidner, Isaiah, in D. GUTHRIE AND J. A. MOTYER, EDS., THE NEW BIBLE COMMENTARY: REVISED, 3rd ed. 594 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1970).*

^{xi} *I Kings 21: 1-19.*

^{xii} *Isaiah 5: 8 (RSV).*

^{xiii} *James 5: 4 (RSV).*

^{xiv} *II Kings 9: 21-36.*

^{xv} *Isaiah 5: 11-12 (RSV).*

^{xvi} *James 5: 1-3.*

^{xvii} *James 5: 7 (RSV).*

^{xviii} *James 5: 10-11 (RSV).*

^{xix} *Isaiah 5: 20-21 (RSV).*

^{xx} *James 5: 13-15 (RSV).*