

Sermon for Morning Prayer

Trinity XX

Lessons:

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the fourteenth Verse of the second Chapter of the Book of Malachi [**MALuh-Kye**].

“Yet ye say, Wherefore? Because the Lord hath been witness between thee and the wife of thy youth, against whom thou hast dealt treacherously: yet is she thy companion, and the wife of thy covenant. And did not he make one? Yet had he the residue of the spirit. And wherefore one? That he might seek a godly seed. Therefore take heed to your spirit, and let none deal treacherously against the wife of his youth. For the Lord, the God of Israel, saith that he hateth putting away: for one covereth violence with his garment, saith the Lord of hosts: therefore take heed to your spirit, that ye deal not treacherously.

“Ye have wearied the Lord with your words. Yet ye say, Wherein have we wearied him? When ye say, Every one that doeth evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and he delighteth in them; or, Where is the God of judgment?”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the third Verse of the nineteenth Chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew.

“The Pharisees also came unto him, tempting him, and saying unto him, Is it lawful for a man to put away his wife for every cause? And he answered and said unto them, Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female, And said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh? Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder. They say unto him, Why did Moses then command to give a writing of divorcement, and to put her away? He saith unto them, Moses because of the hardness of your hearts suffered you to put away your wives: but from the

beginning it was not so. And I say unto you, Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery. Then were there brought unto him little children, that he should put his hands on them, and pray: and the disciples rebuked them. But Jesus said, Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven. And he laid his hands on them, and departed thence.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “Ye have wearied the Lord with your words. Yet ye say, Wherein have we wearied him? When ye say, Every one that doeth evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and he delighteth in them; or, Where is the God of judgment?” In the Name of the Father, and of the † Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Introduction:

In 457 B.C., the Persian king Artaxerxes [**Art-uh-ZERKS-eze**] sent a small colony of Jews back to Palestine, with Nehemiah [**KNEE-uh-My-uh**] as their governor and Ezra [**EHZ-ruh**] as their priest. The Temple itself had been rebuilt seventy years earlier under Cyrus [**SIGH-russ**]; now Nehemiah [**KNEE-uh-My-uh**] continued the work of Jewish national restoration through the physical rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem while Ezra [**EHZ-ruh**] began the religious and spiritual rebuilding of Jewish life. Malachi [**MAL-uh-Kye**] supported their efforts as the prophet of the period as Haggai [**HAG-eye**] and Zechariah [**ZEK-ar-Eye-uh**] had supported Joshua and Zerubbabel [**ZAIR-oo-BAH-bell**].

Theme:

Today’s First and Second Lessons complement one another in that each deals with a question of principle related to the institution of marriage.

Development:

1. Malachi reminds the Jews that marriage is, in essence, a question of fidelity to a Covenant: first, of keeping God’s Covenant with His people and, second, of a husband’s keeping his covenant with his wife.

The First Lesson argues against marital laxity in general, focused on the problem caused by the small numbers of returned Jewish exiles, about fifty thousand of them. Most of these, of course, were men, unaccompanied by women. Thus they had a natural tendency to seek wives among the people who were already living in the country, people who had been planted in Palestine by the Babylonian and Assyrian conquerors. These people were not Jews, however, and intermarriage with them violated the Mosaic Covenant because it undermined the religious stability of the family which is the ultimate foundation of all religions.

While the situation Malachi addressed had its origin in the problem of intermarriage with pagan foreigners, the principle he adduced applies to all other aspects of marriage as well. Malachi's argument is based on the notion of *covenant*, that is, of contract or treaty. God has committed Himself to the Jewish people in return for that people's religious fidelity. Thus that people is not free to undermine the foundations of its own religious life by weakening the religious framework of its family homes.

The Church, in selecting the readings that make up today's Lessons, has quite correctly linked this principle to the issue of divorce at will that Christ addresses in the Second Lesson: just as the rôle of marriage in maintaining godly families is an important part of the people's Covenant with God, so also the husband has covenanted, has committed himself by his promise to his wife, and is therefore not free to break that promise and to cast her aside.

2. The ancient Jews, down to Christ's time, countenanced divorce at the will of the husband; Christ, however, taught that this is not permissible.

Our Lord teaches that divorce was only practiced in the Old Testament because mankind had not yet reached enough spiritual enlightenment to understand that it is contrary to God's plan. His argument, as recorded by St. Matthew in today's Second Lesson, is an *ontological* argument, that is, one rooted in the nature of being. Christ declares that in the act of marriage the husband and wife become, by divine dispensation, no longer two but henceforth one. This new unity, which did not exist prior to their marriage, is a Sacramental reality. Because a Sacrament is God's presence in this physical world, this new divinely-ordained unity of marriage cannot be severed by mere human means.

When Our Lord introduced this new concept of matrimony, He was acting contrary to the instincts of society, which always tends to support the self-serving interests of its most influential members. The poor and weak might well be forced by the power of economic circumstance to live out their lives yoked to the wives of their youth but the powerful and well-to-do have, in all ages, favored the self-indulgent institutions of serial monogamy and trophy wives.

3. Clear commands from God, such as God's directive that the Covenant People were not to intermarry with foreigners or Christ's instruction on the indissolubility of marriage, run counter to mankind's constant desire prefer personal gratification to obedience to principles.

If we desire to deviate from the divine plan, or even from natural order, we do not want to see ourselves as law breakers. Thus we usually try to justify that deviation to ourselves and to our fellows. We come up with numerous very creative ways to explain why a particular rule, that we wish to violate, does not apply to us or at least why that rule does not apply to the specific situation in which we find ourselves.

These "reasons" can be very subtle indeed. One type says that the rule we wish to break, or have broken, is not really a rule at all. Thus we sometimes hear a statement rejecting the Church's traditional position on something, along the lines of, "The issue of women as ordained Church leaders just could not arise in the patriarchal, oppressive society in which Christ taught so He never said all the Church's ordained leaders had to be men."

Or sometimes the argument is not quite that subtle and says that a clear and explicit rule does not really mean what it seems to be saying. Then we hear statements such as, "The story of Sodom and Gomorrah is not a condemnation of homosexual behavior, it is about the violation of hospitality."

Or sometimes it is just a blatant denial of the authority of inspired Revelation, such as, "The ancient Hebrews did not understand 'sexual orientation' so what they wrote about homosexual and lesbian behavior was primitive and uninformed."

Conclusion:

All these ways of wriggling and squirming to avoid the strictures of accepted Truth are simply examples of what Malachi meant when he wrote:

“Every one that doeth evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and he delighteth in them; or, Where is the God of judgment?”

Our task as Christians is to be on the lookout for these occasions when false teachers try to lead us away from the sure truths that the Church teaches us. They would have us believe that just because Christians have done something for a very long time, that makes it probable that whatever they have been doing is out of date.

Christians, however, know that God created humankind. Nowhere are we told that humanity's basic nature will ever change; to the contrary, the things that were wrong for our grandparents and great-grandparents are almost certainly wrong for us and the things that led our ancestors to God are almost certainly the same things that will save us in our turn. There has been no cataclysmic change in human nature and, except for our grasp of the physical sciences, we are no wiser than were the ancient Jews or the first Christians.

In fact, the first Christians were in a rather better position to know God's mind than we are because they heard with their own ears the words of the Second Person of the Most Holy and Undivided Trinity. They had three years to company with Him and learn from Him face to face. Clearly they had a more direct understanding of His teachings and His principles than we, at our remote time, can ever have. Thus when we find that they did something within the context of the Church, in the absence of contrary evidence, we must assume that they did that in obedience to His wishes.

“Every one that doeth evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and he delighteth in them; or, Where is the God of judgment?”

--oo0oo--

*The Rev'd Canon John A. Hollister
October 5, 2008.*

1 *Psalms and Lessons for the Church Year* (1943), *THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER* x (PECUSA 1928).

2 *Malachi 2:17* (KJV).

3 *This is but one reason that it is nonsense to say, as many Protestants do, that Our Lord Himself instituted not Seven Sacraments but only two, namely Baptism and the Eucharist Cf. Article XXV, The Articles of Religion, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 607 (PECUSA 1928), which it has been argued makes this claim.*

4 *Malachi 2:17* (KJV).

5 *Id.*

6 *Priest Associate, Christ Anglican Catholic Church, New Orleans LA. Honorary Canon, Diocese of the Resurrection, The Anglican Catholic Church. Honorary Canon and Canon to the Ordinary, Diocese of New Orleans, The Anglican Catholic Church.*