

SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYER¹ The Twentieth Sunday after Trinity²

Lessons:³

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the second Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah.⁴

“Moreover the word of the LORD came to me, saying, Go and cry in the ears of Jerusalem, saying, Thus saith [SETH] the Lord; I remember thee, the kindness of thy youth, the love of thine espousals, when thou wentest after me in the wilderness, in a land that was not sown. Israel was holiness unto the LORD, and the firstfruits of his increase: all that devour him shall offend; evil shall come upon them, saith [SETH] the LORD. Hear ye the word of the LORD, O house of Jacob, and all the families of the house of Israel:

“Thus saith [SETH] the LORD, What iniquity have your fathers found in me, that they are gone far from me, and have walked after vanity, and are become vain? Neither said they, Where is the LORD that brought us up out of the land of Egypt, that led us through the wilderness, through a land of deserts and of pits, through a land of drought, and of the shadow of death, through a land that no man passed through, and where no man dwelt? And I brought you into a plentiful country, to eat the fruit thereof and the goodness thereof; but when ye entered, ye defiled my land, and made mine heritage an abomination. The priests said not, Where is the LORD? and they that handle the law knew me not: the pastors also transgressed against me, and the prophets prophesied by Baal [BAY-ull], and walked after things that do not profit.

“Wherefore I will yet plead with you, saith [SETH] the LORD, and with your children’s children will I plead. ... For my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the twenty-second Chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew.⁵

“Jesus said, The kingdom of heaven is like unto a certain king, which made a marriage for his son, and sent forth his servants to call them that were bidden to the wedding: and they would not come. Again, he sent forth other servants, saying, Tell them which are bidden, Behold, I have prepared my dinner: my oxen and my fatlings are killed, and all things are ready: come unto the marriage. But they made light of it, and went their ways, one to his farm, another to his merchandise: and the remnant took his servants, and entreated them spitefully, and slew them. But when the king heard thereof, he was wroth: and he sent forth his armies, and destroyed those murderers, and burned up their city. Then saith [SETH] he to his servants, The wedding is ready, but they which were bidden were not worthy. Go ye therefore into the highways, and as many as ye shall find, bid to the marriage. So those servants went out into the highways, and gathered together all as many as they found, both bad and good: and the wedding was furnished with guests.

“And when the king came in to see the guests, he saw there a man which had not on a wedding-garment: and he saith unto him, Friend, how camest thou in hither not having a wedding-garment? And he was speechless. Then said the king to the servants, Bind him hand and foot, and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. For many are called, but few are chosen.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “[In the outer darkness] men will weep and gnash their teeth.’ For many are called, but few are chosen.”⁶ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Sermon:⁷

Today’s Second Lesson is a parable and parables are metaphors for the Kingdom of God.⁸ Today’s parable is the story of the Great Supper, in which the Kingdom of God is depicted as what theologians refer to as the Messianic Banquet. This account appears in two of the canonical Gospels, those of Matthew⁹

and Luke,¹⁰ as well as in one Second Century extra-canonical source, a Gnostic collection of Jesus' sayings called the Gospel of Thomas.¹¹

(If you've ever seen an advertisement for a collection of "lost books of the Bible" or for books that the Church hid from its members, this Gospel of Thomas is one of the books referred to. As to how well it has been hidden, any good religious book store can order you a copy....)

The Great Supper parable is, in many respects, similar¹² to that of the wicked tenants of the Vineyard, which appears not only in the Gospels of Matthew¹³ and Luke,¹⁴ as does that of the Supper, but in that of Mark as well.¹⁵ The first important aspect of both of these stories is, in the Vineyard one, the landlord's repeated attempts to bring his tenants to a sense of their obligations.

In the Supper storey, this aspect is depicted as the host's invitations, one after another, to guest after guest, in an attempt to fill up the available seats at his table. In these two metaphors, of course, these consecutive invitations represent God's continual reaching out to us, as He seeks to have us amend our lives and conform those lives to the requirements of living in eternity with Him.

God's successive attempts to reach out to us have both societal and individual implications. On the level of a whole society, this is the encapsulated history of Israel as recounted in the Old Testament: God sent prophet after prophet, each of whom called the erring Hebrews to throw off their disobedient ways, to eschew the false gods after whom they trailed, to return to their obligations under the Covenant, and to act faithfully as God's Chosen People. On the level of the individual, the metaphors express the workings of God's grace, which continuously calls us to repent of our sins, to confess those sins, and to amend our lives so that we live, as far as we are able, according to God's commandments.

The second aspect of these metaphors is their acknowledgement that humanity all too often rejects these overtures from God. In the Vineyard parable, this rejection takes the form of the tenants' abuse, and ultimately murder, of the landlord's agents. This suggests particularly well the way ancient Israel as a whole treated most of the prophets whom God sent to it. In the Supper parable, this same

rejection takes the form of the individual guests' lame excuses for not attending upon the hospitable host. These individual prevarications model all too well the weak motives each of us has for not repenting our shortcomings and amending our behavior in the fashion that we all know, on some levels, that we should.

The third aspect of these metaphors is how they show that God's patience, while truly extensive, is not endless, and ultimately those who ignore Him will have cause to regret their imprudence. In the Vineyard story, the landlord punishes the tenants' crimes against his messengers, in a fashion very reminiscent of the way God permitted the Assyrians and the Babylonians to bring Israel and Judah to brook with war and destruction. In the Supper story, the king likewise brings fire and sword to the scornful invitees who mistreat his servants and his righteous vengeance is a clear image of the fire and brimstone that Scripture pictures as awaiting unrepentant sinners.

The fourth aspect of these metaphors is how they show God's turning away from those He first invited, but who spurned Him, to others who would gratefully accept His bidding. In the Vineyard parable, this is the landlord's replacement of the executed murderers with new, and one hopes more obedient, tenants. In the Supper parable, it is the host's bringing in a whole new, and more inclusive, tranche of guests, described as "all whom they found, both bad and good."

This reflects how God sent His Son first to the Jews alone, the people God had chosen and had been nurturing for centuries to be a proper vessel into which He could pour His final revelation, which was the Incarnation of that very same Son. But when, for the majority of the Jews, Christ's message fell on deaf ears, then He sent the Apostles and disciples out to the previously-despised Gentiles and converted them instead.

Finally, there is a fifth aspect that we find in today's parable of the Great Supper but that is missing from the parable of the Vineyard. This is found in the somewhat puzzling account of the host's dealing with one guest in that cohort of the last-called, who appeared at the feast, as bidden, but who failed to show up wearing the appropriate wedding garment.

At first glance, the host's reaction seems completely inconsistent. He has just suffered the frivolous rejection of his hospitality by those very friends and acquaintances upon whom he thought he could rely, and has therefore sent his servants to gather in their places strangers, moreover strangers of a distinctly different class than those for whom the feast had been arranged. One might expect him to be grateful to these replacement guests. But instead, now having gone to all that trouble, he takes umbrage at one of these substitutes and summarily ejects him from the host's home, merely because that guest is not properly dressed.

There are two possible explanations for the importance the host clearly placed on this garment and therefore for why its absence resulted caused that guest to be slung out on his ear. One is the suggestion that the wedding garment represents something the *guest* was supposed to have brought with him to the feast.¹⁶ Then the wedding garment, presumably a clean white alternative to the guest's dusty workaday attire, would represent the white robe of one who attends upon the throne of God in heaven, as is pictured in St. John's Revelation.¹⁷ This robe, in turn, is a symbol of the contrite heart and the true purpose of amendment of life of one who joyfully accepts God's invitation to absolution from sins, that is, to salvation.

The other suggestion is that the wedding garment represents something provided by the *host*.¹⁸ Then the man who was given the bum's rush would have come to the feast, would have seen the garments laid ready for the guests, and would have simply failed to acknowledge the host's offering. In terms of the internal psychology of the parable account, this would have been just too reminiscent of the slighting treatment the host had received from the guests he had first invited, thus angering him to the point of ordering this later man's ejection.

But in terms of the metaphor, this guest's failure to take advantage of the host's gift would represent that guest's failure to fulfill the requirements for salvation. This interpretation oddly parallels an error that, from 1970 until just this Fall, was found in the English translation of the Roman Catholic Mass, in the central part of the rite which we call "the Canon of Consecration".

There, the official translators had misleadingly¹⁹ stated that “Christ died for you and for *all*, for the remission of sins”, thus perpetuating the fundamental heresy of “Universalism”.²⁰ That, however, was an incorrect rendering of the Latin master text, which said, as Pope Benedict’s new translation now also says, “Christ died for you and for *many*, for the remission of sins”.

That difference between “for all” and “for many” is a critical one, for Christ’s death fulfilled the requirements for all men and women to be saved but, alas, not all of them will respond to His invitation. All too many will be like the disdainful guests and will not bother to come to His Supper.

That is why today’s Second Lesson ends with the observation that “[M]any are called, but few are chosen”,²¹ which is the reason why, as it also says, “[In the outer darkness] men will weep and gnash their teeth.”²²

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The Rev’d Canon John A. Hollister, JD²³
October 21, 2012

¹ “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).

² This sermon was originally written on the Gospel for Holy Communion on the Twentieth Sunday after Trinity, 2012.

³ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), *THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER* xxxvii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

⁴ *Jeremiah 2:1-9, 13* (KJV).

⁵ *St. Matthew 22:1-14* (KJV).

⁶ *St. Matthew 22:13b-14* (RSV).

⁷ I am indebted to the Revd Warren E. Shaw, Priest-in-Charge of St. David’s Anglican Catholic Church, Charlottesville, VA, for the insights from which this sermon developed.

⁸ J. D. Crossan, *Parables*, in PAUL J. ACHTEMEIER, ed., *HARPER’S BIBLE DICTIONARY* 749. New York, NY: HarperCollins (1985).

⁹ *St. Matthew 22:1-4*.

¹⁰ *St. Luke 14:16-24.*

¹¹ *Gospel of Thomas 64a.*

¹² *R. E. Nixon, Matthew, in D. GUTHRIE AND J. A. MOTYER, eds., THE NEW BIBLE COMMENTARY REVISED (3rd Ed.) 843. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. (1970).*

¹³ *St. Matthew 21:33-46.*

¹⁴ *St. Luke 20:9-19.*

¹⁵ *St. Mark 12:1-12.*

¹⁶ *Nixon, op. cit.*

¹⁷ *Revelation 4:4.*

¹⁸ *Nixon, op. cit.*

¹⁹ *But, sadly, apparently intentionally, as the same error was repeated in the translations into several European languages.*

²⁰ Until recent decades, the prime exponents of this doctrine were the Unitarian-Universalists but it is now a prime tenet of society in general, the ultimate consequence of Adolf Harnack's reduction of Christianity into "The Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man".

²¹ *St. Matthew 22:14 (RSV).*

²² *St. Matthew 22:13b (RSV).*

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