

Sermon for Morning Prayer
The Twenty-Second Sunday After Trinity

I. Lessons:ⁱ

A. The First Lesson: Here beginneth the fifth Chapter of Baruch.ⁱⁱ

“Put off, O Jerusalem, the garment of mourning and affliction, and put on the comeliness of the glory that cometh from God for ever. Cast about thee a double garment of the righteousness which cometh from God; and set a diadem on thine head of the glory of the Everlasting. For God will shew thy brightness unto every country under heaven. For thy name shall be called of God for ever The peace of righteousness, and The glory of God’s worship. Arise, O Jerusalem, and stand on high, and look about toward the east, and behold thy children gathered from the west unto the east by the word of the Holy One, rejoicing in the remembrance of God. For they departed from thee on foot, and were led away of their enemies: but God bringeth them unto thee exalted with glory, as children of the kingdom. For God hath appointed that every high hill, and banks of long continuance, should be cast down, and valleys filled up, to make even the ground, that Israel may go safely in the glory of God, Moreover even the woods and every sweetsmelling tree shall overshadow Israel by the commandment of God. For God shall lead Israel with joy in the light of his glory with the mercy and righteousness that cometh from him.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

B. The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the twenty-fourth Verse of the second Chapter of the First General Epistle of St. John.ⁱⁱⁱ

“... Let that therefore abide in you, which ye have heard from the beginning. If that which ye have heard from the beginning shall remain in you, ye also shall continue in the Son, and in the Father. And this is the promise that he hath promised us, even eternal life. These things have I written unto you concerning them that seduce you. But the anointing which ye have received of him abideth in you, and ye need not that any man teach you: but as the same anointing teacheth you of all

things, and is truth, and is no lie, and even as it hath taught you, ye shall abide in him. And now, little children, abide in him; that, when he shall appear, we may have confidence, and not be ashamed before him at his coming. If ye know that he is righteous, ye know that every one that doeth righteousness is born of him.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

II. Text:

From the Second Lesson: “I write this to you about those who would deceive you; but the anointing which you received from him abides in you, and you have no need that anyone should teach you; as his anointing teaches you about everything, and is true, and is no lie, just as it has taught you, abide in him.”^{iv} In the Name of the Father, and of the ☩ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

III. Introduction, Theme and Developement:

Today’s text is highly reminiscent of something else St. John wrote, to-wit: “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.”^v These texts set forth something that theologians call “the indefectibility of the Church”.

This doctrine is based upon Our Lord’s promise that He would remain with the Church He had founded: “[L]o, I am with you always, to the close of the age.”^{vi} In addition to His own presence in the Church, He also promised that the Holy Spirit would forever dwell in and guide the Church: “And I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him; you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you.”^{vii}

In another place, St. John says: “But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father wills end in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.”^{viii}

In accordance with these promises, the doctrine of the indefectibility of the Church holds that, over time, that same Church cannot maintain serious error as to the truths of the Faith. It may from time to time err in its understanding of scientific, historical, sociological, or economic facts and it may err in the ways it attempts to apply the truths of the Faith to the specific problems of a particular time and place, but it cannot err persistently with regards to the doctrines it exists to hold and teach.

Notice that this guarantee against error must be made apparent over time. At particular times, and in specific places, individual men and women, even men and women who hold Office in the Church, may in fact err and may even err grievously. Thus it is particularly important that we should test any doctrinal proposition according to the consensus of the Faith over time and geography, as St. Paul did when in the course of his ministry he traveled to Jerusalem to compare his teaching with that of the Apostles resident there.^{ix}

For the purpose of this sort of testing, one of the most abiding formulae has been that known as “the Vincentian Canon”, from St. Vincent of Leirins who wrote in the Fifth Century:

“Now in the Catholic Church itself we take the greatest care to hold that which has been believed everywhere, always and by all. That is truly and properly ‘Catholic,’ as is shown by the very force and meaning of the word, which comprehends everything almost universally. We shall hold to this rule if we follow universality [*i.e.* œcumenicity], antiquity, and consent. We shall follow universality if we acknowledge that one Faith to be true which the whole Church throughout the world confesses; antiquity if we in no wise depart from those interpretations which it is clear that our ancestors and fathers proclaimed; consent, if in antiquity itself we keep following the definitions and opinions of all, or certainly nearly all, bishops and doctors alike.”^x

Let us look at just one example of how this principle operates upon proposals to alter the Church’s basic practices. Beginning in a small way in the 1940s and increasing in intensity throughout the 1950s and ‘60s, reaching a culmination in the 1970s, certain persons in the

developed nations of the West argued that the Church's historic restriction of its ordained ministry to males was discriminatory and unjustified. Those who proposed changing that nature of that ministry, so that women might occupy clerical Offices, pointed to secular concepts of equal employment opportunity to justify the change and supported these concepts with the observation that men and women were created equal in the eyes of God.

Of course, these arguments overlooked the obvious fact that equality in essential value does not necessarily imply identity in function. But, from a theological standpoint, how did that proposal withstand testing by the Vincentian Canon?

Clearly, it failed the test of universality. Not only had the *entire* Church never ordained women, but *no* portion of the Church had ever presumed to do so on its own account. Thus the proposal was from the perspective of universality a complete and utter idiosyncrasy which could not possibly support a claim to Catholicity.

As to the second branch of the test, that of antiquity, the new proposal likewise failed. Not only did the ancient Church never ordain women, insofar as we have any records, it never even discussed the possibility, let alone discussed and rejected it. The proposal, in other words, was from this perspective a complete and utter novelty which could not possibly support a claim to Catholicity.

Finally, the proposal likewise failed the third branch of the test, that of consent. Not only did the other Churches that Anglicans then recognized as Catholic^{xi} not agree with this proposal, but all three of them notified the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Church of Canada that moving forward with this particular proposal would raise insuperable barriers to the œcumenical discussions that were then, and for some decades had been, going forward.

Thus the proposal was from the perspective of consent a complete and utter disruption which could not possibly support a claim to Catholicity. Despite these œcumenical warnings, both the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Church of Canada, thinking themselves to

know more than the entire rest of the Catholic world, changed their official documents to permit the apparent ordination of women.

If anyone had doubted that the proposal to “ordain” women failed St. Vincent’s test of consent, the result of this arrogant act confirmed that beyond question, because that result was precisely what those two Provinces had been warned about. First, the Old Catholic Union of Utrecht, which since 1930 had been in full communion with the Lambeth Communion, severed that intercommunion not just with the two erring North American Provinces but with the entire Lambeth Communion. Next, the Eastern Orthodox Communion, which had already drafted documents to give recognition to the churches of the Lambeth Communion, tore up those documents unsigned.^{xii} And, finally, while the Roman Communion officially continued to participate in the bilateral ARCIC^{xiii} discussions with the Lambeth Communion, for many years those discussions have been essentially formalities, without any real content or purpose.

So traditionally Anglicans, whenever faced with proposed doctrinal innovations, have resorted to, and have abided by the results of, this three-fold test of universality, antiquity, and consent. Indeed, how could we do otherwise, in view of our two most characteristic claims?

The first of these claims, which is unique to Anglicanism among all the various church groups that claim to be “Catholic”, is that while we are by no means the entirety of the Catholic Church, we are most assuredly and in all important respects a portion of that Church. This is in complete distinction from, for example, our Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox brethren, each of whom claims to be, and to be exclusively, that One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church to which we attest in the three Creeds.

These competing, and mutually exclusive, claims of the Roman and Eastern Churches are amusingly summarized by Fr. Robert Hart, who refers to them jointly as “the two One True Churches”.

The second of these claims, which is unique to Anglicanism among all the various church groups that claim to be “Catholic”, is one

that flows naturally and inevitably from the first. It is that we have no distinctive doctrines of our own; instead, we merely hold, teach, and practice that which was always held, taught, and practiced by the ancient and undivided Church of the Apostles prior to the Great Schism of 1054 A.D. The beliefs of that one original Church are precisely what the Vincentian Canon seeks to define which is why it is so congenial to Anglican modes of thought.

These two distinctive Anglican concepts, that is, that we have no distinctive beliefs because we are merely a part although a full part of Christ's One Church, may be viewed as flowing directly from Our Lord's guarantee to His Apostles and disciples that both He and the Holy Spirit would always be with them: "I write this to you about those who would deceive you; but the anointing which you received from him abides in you, and you have no need that anyone should teach you; as his anointing teaches you about everything, and is true, and is no lie, just as it has taught you, abide in him."^{xiv}

IV. Conclusion:

So the problem for us, as Anglicans, is not what we are to believe, because all we need in order to determine that is to look to what the Church has always believed. Our problem is, rather, how to discern what it is we are called to do as a result of those beliefs. In other words, if we truly and sincerely believe what we profess to believe, how are those beliefs to shape and guide our activities here in this world?

For as the XIIth Article of Religion warns us, "Good works ... do spring out necessarily of a true and lively Faith; insomuch that by them a lively Faith may be as evidently known as a tree discerned by the fruit."^{xv}

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October 31, 2010.

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

ⁱⁱ *Baruch 5: 1-9 (KJV).*

ⁱⁱⁱ *I John 2: 24-29 (KJV).*

^{iv} *I John 2: 26-27 (RSV).*

^v *St. John 16: 13 (RSV).*

^{vi} *St. Matthew 28: 20b (RSV).*

^{vii} *St. John 14: 16-17 (RSV).*

^{viii} *St. John 14: 26 (RSV).*

^{ix} *Galatians 2: 1-10.*

^x *St. Vincent of Leirins, The Commonitorium, Chap. II (434 A.D.).*

^{xi} *The Roman Catholic Communion, the Eastern Orthodox Communion, and (until 2000-2002) the Old Catholic Union of Utrecht. After 2002, the Polish National Catholic Church is the sole surviving remnant of that former Union of Utrecht which can reasonably claim to be Catholic.*

^{xii} *Personal communication to the author from an Eastern Orthodox peritus who was present at the pan-Orthodox meeting in Moscow, USSR, at which those documents were to be signed.*

^{xiii} *The Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, formed in 1970 between the Lambeth Communion's Anglican Consultative Council and the Roman Communion's Secretariat (now Pontifical Council) for Promoting Christian Unity.*

^{xiv} *I John 2: 26-27 (RSV).*

^{xv} *Of Good Works, Articles of Religion, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 605 (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*

^{xvi} *Priest Associate, Christ Anglican Catholic Church, New Orleans (Metairie), LA. Honorary Canon, the Diocese of the Resurrection, and Honorary Canon and Canon to the Ordinary, The Diocese of New Orleans, The Anglican Catholic Church.*