

## Sermon for Morning Prayer Trinity XXIII

### Lessons:

**First Lesson:** Here beginneth the twenty-ninth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah.

“Now these are the words of the letter that Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem unto the residue of the elders which were carried away captives, and to the priests, and to the prophets, and to all the people whom Nebuchadnezzar had carried away captive from Jerusalem to Babylon....

“Thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, unto all that are carried away captives, whom I have caused to be carried away from Jerusalem unto Babylon; Build ye houses, and dwell in them; and plant gardens, and eat the fruit of them; Take ye wives, and beget sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons, and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters; that ye may be increased there, and not diminished. And seek the peace of the city whither I have caused you to be carried away captives, and pray unto the Lord for it: for in the peace thereof shall ye have peace. For thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel; Let not your prophets and your diviners, that be in the midst of you, deceive you, neither hearken to your dreams which ye cause to be dreamed. For they prophesy falsely unto you in my name: I have not sent them, saith the Lord.

“For thus saith the Lord, That after seventy years be accomplished at Babylon I will visit you, and perform my good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place. For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the Lord, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end. Then shall ye call upon me, and ye shall go and pray unto me, and I will hearken unto you. And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart. And I will be found of you, saith the Lord: and I will turn away your captivity, and I will gather you from all the nations, and from all the places whither I have driven you, saith the Lord; and I will bring you again into the place whence I caused you to be carried away captive.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

**Second Lesson:** Here beginneth the third Chapter of the Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to Titus [**TIE-tuss**].

“Put them in mind to be subject to principalities and powers, to obey magistrates, to be ready to every good work, To speak evil of no man, to be no brawlers, but gentle, shewing [**SHOW-ing**] all meekness unto all men.

“For we ourselves also were sometimes foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving divers lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful, and hating one another. But after that the kindness and love of God our Saviour toward man appeared, Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost; Which he shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour; That being justified by his grace, we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life. This is a faithful saying, and these things I will that thou affirm constantly, that they which have believed in God might be careful to maintain good works. These things are good and profitable unto men.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

### **Text:**

From the Second Lesson: “Put them in mind to be subject to principalities and powers, to obey magistrates, to be ready to every good work, To speak evil of no man, to be no brawlers, but gentle, shewing [**SHOW-ing**] all meekness unto all men.” In the Name of the Father, and of the † Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

### **Introduction:**

Civilized life requires a certain minimum level of civil peace. When the population is distracted by riots and tumults, or when it lives in the constant fear of being attacked by criminals, the social order breaks down as each citizen must try to protect himself and his family by turning his home into a fortress and hunkering down there as in a state of siege. Under such conditions, ordinary social intercourse and commerce become impossible.

Just think of the stories we read frequently these days about persecuted minorities, such as Christians, in Iraq. Such threatened people are compelled to stay home from

their jobs and stay away from the churches, cannot even go to the public markets. They fear, rightly, that when they gather in groups, as for worship, they are targets for bombings and drive-by shootings; when they travel about on their lawful occasions, they may be kidnapped and murdered or shot down on the streets.

Eventually, the stresses and strains of such a life – not to mention the financial impossibility of existing with no earned income – force such people into exile in safer places. Under such conditions, mankind's higher pursuits suffer because they must be laid aside in favor of physical priorities such as mere survival. Among those higher pursuits that suffer at these times is religion and especially the religious necessities of regular public worship and orderly private devotion. This is why Jeremiah told the exiled Jews, "And seek the peace of the city whither I have caused you to be carried away captives, and pray unto the Lord for it: for in the peace thereof shall ye have peace."

### **Theme:**

The contrary impulses that lead to disorderly personal lives – and if left unrestrained on a broad scale, to civil unrest – are simply the product of what Christians call "original sin".

The Articles of Religion remind us that "Original sin ... is the fault and corruption of Nature of every man, that naturally is engendered of the offspring of Adam; whereby man is very far gone from original righteousness, and is of his own nature inclined to evil, so that the flesh lusteth always contrary to the Spirit...." Here "Spirit" is capitalized in the text, because the Article means that our "flesh", the physical being of each of us, struggles against the Holy Spirit's attempts to guide us in the ways God would have us walk.

Thus we must say in the General Confession in the Daily Offices, "We have offended against thy holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; And we have done those things which we ought not to have done; and there is no health in us."

"Health" there is used in its original sense of "wholeness" and we cannot be truly whole so long as we are not fully united to God. Only God Himself can help us overcome this tendency within us and so heal the separation we have brought about by our own acts. He does this by coming Himself to be present with us and in us.

## Development:

### 1. Paul tells Titus to instruct his people to obey lawful earthly authorities, including the civil government.

Although Paul does not here elaborate on the connection, the constituted secular authorities have their appointed part to play in God's plan. As in another of his Epistles he tells the Romans:

“Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to *execute* wrath upon him that doeth evil. Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake.”

To the same effect St. Peter wrote:

“Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme; Or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well. For so is the will of God, that with well doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men: As free, and not using *your* liberty for a cloke of maliciousness, but as the servants of God. Honour all *men*. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the king.”

In making these statements, these two Apostles were merely drawing out the implications of the lesson their Master, Our Lord, had taught when he said: “Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's.” Thus the civil government has an important rôle in restraining the brawling, disobedience, and other evils that Paul cited in today's Epistle and that are the inevitable result of people's devoting themselves to lustful, pleasure-seeking ways of life.

### 2. The outward restraints imposed by the civil authorities cannot, by themselves, restrain mankind's unruly impulses.

However desirable the outward restraints on behavior imposed by the civil authorities are, and they are much to be desired, they cannot be sufficient to curtail all disorderly conduct. And these insufficient outward restraints devised by society are paralleled by some inward restraints as well, those implanted by custom, culture, family training, and formal education. However, such is the power of Original Sin that these societal controls will eventually prove inadequate. Thus the ultimate answer lies not in human cultural constructs, no matter how civilized, but in super-human aid provided by divine dispensation, that is, by Grace. So it is that in Baptism we “renounce the devil and all his works, the vain pomp and glory of the world, with all covetous desires of the same, and the sinful desires of the flesh...” and the celebrant prays “that this Child, now to be baptized..., may receive the fullness of thy grace....”

In this connection, we must remember that “Grace” is simply the English derivative of the Latin word “*gratia*” [**GRAH-Tee-ah**], which means “gift”. The gift which God gives us in the Sacraments is His Presence with us and in us. Obviously, there can be no greater force for good than the actual Presence of God.

**3. God has given us the necessary strength to withstand our temptations to sin. He has done so by changing our spiritual natures in Baptism and by the continuous reinforcement we receive in the ongoing Sacraments of the Church, particularly in His Eucharist.**

Through Jeremiah, God told the Jews in exile: “Then shall ye call upon me, and ye shall go and pray unto me, and I will hearken unto you. And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart. And I will be found of you, saith the Lord....” St. Paul reminds St. Titus of how, under the New Covenant, God accomplishes this for us: through “the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost; Which he shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour; That being justified by his grace, we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.”

We must always remember, however, that this is a free gift from God to us, not something we have earned or can ever deserve. As St. Paul wrote St. Titus: “Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost; Which he shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour....”

## Conclusion:

This is yet one more answer that can be given to those who ask why they should bother to go to church when they can pray to God by themselves in their living rooms or bedrooms. The Sacraments are administered by, and in the context of, the gathered community of the People of God. That is because these Sacraments are a communal act, so we only celebrate the Sacraments privately when those in need of them are unable to come to the communal celebrations.

Yet we need the regular renewing, strengthening effect of those Sacraments, the repeated experience of God's presence in us and in our lives, to be able to withstand the unruly tendencies that are inborn parts of our human nature.

Without this gift of God, that is by God's giving God to us, we are condemned to live unquiet, restless personal lives and, if enough of those around us also do not let God into their lives, we are condemned to live in civil chaos as well.

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*The Rev'd Canon John A. Hollister  
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*1 Psalms and Lessons for the Church Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER x (PECUSA 1928).*

*2 Titus 3:1 (KJV).*

*3 Jeremiah 29:7 (KJV).*

*4 Article IX, "Of Original or Birth-Sin", Articles of Religion, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 604 (PECUSA 1928).*

*5 Cf. A General Confession, The Order for Daily Morning Prayer, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 6 (PECUSA 1928) and The Order for Daily Evening Prayer, id. at 23.*

*6 Romans 13:1-7 (KJV).*

*7 1 Peter 2:13-17 (KJV).*

*8 St. Matthew 22:17-21 (KJV).*

*9 The Ministration of Holy Baptism, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 276 (PECUSA 1928).*

*10 Id. 279*

*11 "[A]n outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace given*

*unto us; ordained by Christ himself, as a means whereby we receive the same, and as a pledge to assure us thereof.” A Catechism, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 581 (PECUSA 1928).*

*12 Jeremiah 29:12-14a (KJV).*

*13 Titus 3:5b-7 (KJV).*

*14 Titus 3:5-6 (KJV).*

*15 Priest Assistant, Christ Anglican Catholic Church, 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.*