

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER

The Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Trinity

Lessons:¹

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the thirteenth Verse of the third Chapter of Malachi.²

“Your words have been stout against me, saith the Lord. Yet ye say, What have we spoken so much against thee? Ye have said, It is vain to serve God: and what profit is it that we have kept his ordinance, and that we have walked mournfully before the Lord of hosts? And now we call the proud happy; yea, they that work wickedness are set up; yea, they that tempt God are even delivered.

“Then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another: and the Lord hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the Lord, and that thought upon his name. And they shall be mine, saith the Lord of hosts, in that day when I make up my jewels; and I will spare them, as a man spareth his own son that serveth him. Then shall ye return, and discern between the righteous and the wicked, between him that serveth God and him that serveth him not. For, behold, the day cometh, that shall burn as an oven; and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble: and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the Lord of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch. But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings; and ye shall go forth, and grow up as calves of the stall. And ye shall tread down the wicked; for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet in the day that I shall do this, saith the Lord of hosts.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the seventeenth Verse of the tenth Chapter of the Gospel according to St. Luke.³

“And the seventy returned again with joy, saying, Lord, even the devils are subject unto us through thy name. And he said unto them, I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven. Behold, I give unto you

power to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy: and nothing shall by any means hurt you. Notwithstanding in this rejoice not, that the spirits are subject unto you; but rather rejoice, because your names are written in heaven.

“In that hour Jesus rejoiced in spirit, and said, I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes: even so, Father; for so it seemed good in thy sight. All things are delivered to me of my Father: and no man knoweth who the Son is, but the Father; and who the Father is, but the Son, and he to whom the Son will reveal him.

“And he turned him unto his disciples, and said privately, Blessed are the eyes which see the things that ye see: For I tell you, that many prophets and kings have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them; and to hear those things which ye hear, and have not heard them.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “Your words have been stout against me, saith the Lord. Yet ye say, What have we spoken so much against thee? Ye have said, It is vain to serve God: and what profit is it that we have kept his ordinance, and that we have walked mournfully before the Lord of hosts? And now we call the proud happy; yea, they that work wickedness are set up; yea, they that tempt God are even delivered.”⁴

That was the King James Version, but the force of the complaint may be even clearer in a more contemporary translation:

“‘You have said harsh things against me,’ says the Lord. ‘Yet you ask, “What have we said against you?” You have said, “It is futile to serve God. What did you gain by carrying out his requirements and going about like mourners before the Lord Almighty? But now we call the arrogant blessed. Certainly the evildoers prosper, and even those who challenge God escape.”’”⁵

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.
Amen.

Introduction:

“[N]ow we call the arrogant blessed. Certainly the evildoers prosper, and even those who challenge God escape.” This certainly could describe the current situation in the world around us, particularly the situation in certain church groups that are all too familiar to us. I refer to those groups that claim to be carrying on the Catholic Faith of the historic Creeds but in fact are all the while turning the Church’s traditional teachings on their heads.

Thus these groups declare permissible, and even laudable, deeds which Scripture emphatically declares to be abominations; seek to subvert the definitions of fundamental relationships such as marriage; and, as an essential step toward gaining acceptance for these false teachings, uses subtle but erroneous techniques for undermining the normative authority of the Church’s Tradition and in particular of the written portion of that Tradition that we call Scripture.

“Well, those ancient people just didn’t understand these things as well as we enlightened folk do in this advanced Twenty-First Century,” they say, as though basic human intelligence and the ability to observe what goes on around us were in their times deficient but in our time have somehow progressed along with the advanced knowledge of astrophysics, geology, and biology on which we pride ourselves.

Theme:

This Church, along with the entire Continuing Church movement, was formed thirty years ago because certain far-sighted people realized that false teachings cannot be propagated unless there are false teachers to foster them. The Church’s appointed teachers are its Bishops, who are the successors of the Apostles, to whom Our Lord confided the leadership of His Body.

By 1977, it had become apparent to those who chose to pay attention that the Bishops of the Protestant Episcopal Church and of the Anglican Church of Canada defaulted on their basic obligation to “banish and drive away from the Church all erroneous and strange doctrine contrary to God’s Word; and both privately and openly to call upon and encourage others to the same”.⁶ Thus it became necessary for the original “Continuers” to leave those bodies, to form a body which would reject these false teachings and strange doctrines and which would set forth true teachings and correct doctrine.

To form this new body, however, required the election and consecration of faithful Bishops because, again, the Bishops are the basic teachers of the Church.

Development:

- 1. Christ passed on to His disciples His authority over the Church, which St. Luke summarizes or illustrates by the conferring of His power to heal the sick and to expel demons.**

St. Matthew records Our Lord’s final words to His Apostles as being, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”⁷

That “Therefore”, followed as it is with His promise to be with the Apostles for the rest of this age, clearly implies that He is conferring on them the powers necessary to discharge their new Office. This is stated even more expressly by St. Mark:

“He said to them, ‘Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.... And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; ... they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well.’ ... [A]nd the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it.”⁸

Our Lord sent the seventy disciples out on what we might call an “internship”, their return from which is the subject of today’s Second Lesson from St. Luke. In St. Luke’s account, the powers of healing the sick and exorcising demons stood for the overall authority in the Church which would be theirs after Christ’s Ascension, the authority for which they were being prepared, in part, by that very “internship” journey.

- 2. The disciples – the senior of whom would become the Apostles – received Christ’s power and authority for the teaching of the flock and the building up of the Church, not for their own aggrandizement. Their ministry, and that of their successors, the Bishops, is a ministry of service to the Body of Christ.**

As the Second Lesson records Our Lord telling those Apostles-in-training: “... I have given you power to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you.”⁹ But this must be read in conjunction with His other instructions to them. Thus St. Mark records His telling the Apostles that they are to teach the world “to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you.”¹⁰

Note those words. The Apostles were not commanded to make things up as they went along. They were not commanded to teach whatever they themselves felt was good, and they certainly were not commanded to teach whatever is currently fashionable or is considered “cutting edge” within Ivy League faculties of religious studies. Nor were they commanded to teach what will play well on the pages of *The Washington Post* or *The New York Times*. They were not commanded to teach what the talk show hosts want to hear during interviews on television or public radio. Instead, they were commanded to teach people to observe what *Christ Himself* taught.

- 3. The Apostles, and their successors the Bishops, will be judged by Our Lord for how diligently and faithfully they have used these powers and this authority in His service.**

As today's First Lesson reminds us, one day we will each face a real Judgement, not a merely figurative one: "And you will see again the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not. 'Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evil-doer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire,' says the Lord Almighty. 'Not a root or a branch will be left to them.'"¹¹

For those who lead the Church, this Judgement is particularly problematic, because simply by virtue of their Offices they receive special attention from the devil. In particular, pride in their positions and powers is an ever-present danger: "... [D]o not rejoice, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice, that your names are written in heaven."¹² Thus when a Bishop is consecrated, the chief consecrator prays for God's blessing and grace upon the consecrand, "to the edifying of thy Church, and to the honour, praise, and glory of thy Name...."¹³

Similarly, the chief consecrator examines the conscrand, asking him among other things, "Will you deny all ungodliness and worldly lusts, and live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world; that you may show yourself in all things an example of good works unto others, that the adversary may be ashamed, having nothing to say against you?"¹⁴ And in one of the final prayers of that service, the chief consecrator again prays that the new Bishop "may be, to such as believe, a wholesome example in word, in conversation, in love, in faith, in chastity, and in purity...."¹⁵

Conclusion:

What can we say about the example given by a "Bishop" who deserts his wife and family to live in adultery with his catamite? Is this "deny[ing] all ungodliness and worldly lusts, and liv[ing] soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world"? Is this "a wholesome example ... in chastity, and in purity"? What can we say about the self-proclaimed "church" that tolerates such an example among what is supposed to be an Apostolic ministry that represents Our Lord Himself?

What can we say about a “church” that teaches that the plain words of Scripture do not mean what they say? Does this not impugn God’s ability to communicate with us, and so reduce Him to an ineffectual figure on the level of the dumb idols of the pagans?

What can we say about a “church” that teaches that those who wrote down the Scriptures under God’s inspiration did not understand the complexities of human relationships or know the motivations of the human mind? Is this not in fact the arrogant assertion that we are more intelligent, or more insightful, than they were? And is this not the clear assertion that what they wrote could not actually have been inspired by God, or at least that God Himself does not fully understand us?

What can we say about a “church” that denies that Holy Scripture is a clear, safe, and reliable guide for human conduct? Does this suggestion not leave us helpless and lost, without guide or hope in the midst of all the confusions, uncertainties, and tragedies of life in a physical, created world?

There are many answers that could be given to these questions but this morning I put before you only two. First, a group that calls itself a “church” but that teaches what I have outlined above is not a Church as Christians have always understood the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church to be.

Second, the leaders of such a group, even if they arrogate to themselves the title of “Bishop”, cannot possibly believe in the actual prospect of standing personally before Our Lord and Saviour and having to give individual accounts of their ministries they conducted in His Name.

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The Rev’d Canon John A. Hollister¹⁶
November 2, 2008.

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

² *Malachi 3:13—4:3 (KJV).*

³ *St. Luke 10:17-24 (KJV).*

⁴ *Malachi 3:13-15 (KJV).*

⁵ *Ibid. (NIV).*

⁶ *The Form of Ordaining or Consecrating a Bishop, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 555 (PECUSA 1928).*

⁷ *St. Matthew 28:18b-20 (NIV).*

⁸ *St. Mark 16:15-20 (NIV).*

⁹ *St. Luke 10:19 (NIV).*

¹⁰ *St. Matthew 28:20a (KJV).*

¹¹ *Malachi 3:18-4:1 (NIV).*

¹² *St. Luke 10:20b (NIV).*

¹³ *The Form of Ordaining or Consecrating a Bishop, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 553 (PECUSA 1928).*

¹⁴ *Ibid. at 555.*

¹⁵ *Ibid. at 559.*

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