

Sermon for Morning Prayer The Second Sunday after Trinity

Lessons:ⁱ

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the twentieth Chapter of the Fifth Book of Moses, called Deuteronomy.ⁱⁱ

“When thou goest out to battle against thine enemies, and seest horses, and chariots, and a people more than thou, be not afraid of them: for the Lord thy God is with thee, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt. And it shall be, when ye are come nigh unto the battle, that the priest shall approach and speak unto the people, And shall say unto them, Hear, O Israel, ye approach this day unto battle against your enemies: let not your hearts faint, fear not, and do not tremble, neither be ye terrified because of them; For the Lord your God is he that goeth with you, to fight for you against your enemies, to save you.

“And the officers shall speak unto the people, saying, What man is there that hath built a new house, and hath not dedicated it? let him go and return to his house, lest he die in the battle, and another man dedicate it. And what man is he that hath planted a vineyard, and hath not yet eaten of it? let him also go and return unto his house, lest he die in the battle, and another man eat of it. And what man is there that hath betrothed a wife, and hath not taken her? let him go and return unto his house, lest he die in the battle, and another man take her. And the officers shall speak further unto the people, and they shall say, What man is there that is fearful and fainthearted? let him go and return unto his house, lest his brethren’s heart faint as well as his heart. And it shall be, when the officers have made an end of speaking unto the people, that they shall make captains of the armies to lead the people.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the fifty-seventh Verse of the ninth Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Luke.ⁱⁱⁱ

“And it came to pass, that, as they went in the way, a certain man said unto him, Lord, I will follow thee whithersoever thou goest. And Jesus said unto him, Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head. And he said unto another, Follow me. But he said, Lord, suffer me first to go and bury my father. Jesus said unto him, Let the dead bury their dead:

but go thou and preach the kingdom of God. And another also said, Lord, I will follow thee; but let me first go bid them farewell, which are at home at my house. And Jesus said unto him, No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.”^{iv} In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Introduction:

Today’s First Lesson comes from the period of the Israelites’ invasion of the Promised Land, when the Lord had promised the Hebrews that He would be with them and would support them as they conquered the territory He had given them to be their home. The opening verses of Deuteronomy, Chapter 20, prescribe the mustering-in of the army that is to conduct the holy war to wrest the Promised Land from its Canaanite [**KANE-ann-ight**] occupiers.

Theme:

According to this passage, the conquest is a total commitment by the Israelite people, but that commitment looks in two directions at once: to the present need for an army and to the future need for a functioning society. Not only is God concerned that they will muster sufficient troops to secure the land He has given them, but He is also concerned that the fabric of their daily lives will remain intact and the structures of their national life will be healthy when they come into their inheritance. There would be no point in conquering the land if it could not be lived upon in prosperity; this, after all, is the “land of milk and honey”.

Development:

To assure the morale and integrity of the army, and that its members support each other in the time of need, the faint-hearted are excused from service. And in

order to protect the future prosperity of the Israelite nation, certain warriors are to be excused from the battles that are otherwise obligatory for their contemporaries.

The building of an house is a quasi-religious act, perhaps even an actually religious one, as it is the founding of a family unit on the soil given to the Chosen People by God. As the fulfillment of God's bounty, the inauguration of that home is the occasion for an exemption of the householder from military service. Having done his assigned rôle to establish Israel's future in its national home, he will still be available for future calls to military service when needed in other crises.

Similarly, the building of infrastructure such as the planting of vineyards and other agricultural improvements that take a considerable time from their commencements until productivity, is vital to the future of the nation. When a vineyard has been planted, its safe and healthy developement requires close attention and care until it is permanently established. Thus a farmer who has just made this investment in "sweat equity" is to stay home and tend it,^v thus assuring the future harvests upon which the population will depend. He, like the new householder, will always be available for future calls to service; thus they form a sort of military reserve force. And, in the same vein, there is the bridegroom, who is to stay at home, planting the seed of a new generation of Israelites; he, too, can be called to military service after he has performed this other, vital service.

Not only do these exemptions serve the larger purposes of the entire nation but also have a military basis. They assure that Israelites absent on military service would not be distracted from their duties by legitimate preoccupations with affairs at home.^{vi}

Thus the First Lesson can be seen as an exploration of the contours of the issue of **commitment** to a cause. That is the cause of the national security of God's Chosen People, which is undoubtedly an issue that trenches upon the divine. That is to be contrasted, however, with today's Second Lesson which deals with the issue of **commitment** to a cause that is unquestionably, and in its most central aspects, divine. That is the issue of commitment to Our Lord on the part of those who have been called to join themselves to Him.

If it is essential to accomplishing a military mission that its members not be distracted by personal concerns, so much the more is it essential to the Lord's mission. Thus in today's Second Lesson, following the pattern of the service

exemptions in Deuteronomy, Jesus warns off the faint-hearted from lightly making a commitment to follow Him.

First there is the man who loudly declared his readiness to follow Christ but whom Christ Himself warned of the insecurities and difficulties that lay before him on that path. St. Matthew describes this man as a “scribe”,^{vii} that is, as a scholar of the law, which is not a profession one automatically associates with rough living. Neither Gospel account tells us what, after this warning, this man decided to do, but somehow that very silence seems to suggest it was not to turn away from a life of comfort in order to follow Our Lord down the dusty roads of Palestine.

Then a second man declared his readiness to be one of Christ’s disciples, provided only that he could wait just long enough to bury his father. It has been suggested that what he meant was that his father was terminally ill, although not yet dead, and he wished to tarry long enough to assure himself of his inheritance.^{viii} Whether that hope for financial reward was the situation or not, burying the dead is a civilized nicety but is not essential to the carrying out of Our Lord’s mission, in the way that having missionaries on the road and preaching is essential.

And, taking Our Lord’s reference to “the dead” not literally but as a figure of speech, it has also been suggested that what He meant was “those who are spiritually dead”,^{ix} for such would obviously not be volunteering for the difficult life of the committed Christian. Thus it is also no surprise that Jesus also discouraged the man who clearly was prepared to be distracted by thoughts of home and kindred.

Conclusion:

The profession of a Christian is an absolute commitment.^x We are not always, or even often, called to leave home, family, and friends and to set out, dependent on the charity of others for our sustenance,^{xi} but that is always a possibility and therefore we must always be prepared to fulfill it.

In cases of extreme need, that is the ultimate basis for martyrdom, and even in daily life it is the wellspring of true charity: that God’s needs always take precedence over our personal needs. No one who is unwilling to face that precedence of needs can make anything except a purely facile commitment to Our Lord and to His service.

The Rev'd Canon John A. Hollister^{xii}
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ⁱ *Psalms and Lessons for the Church Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxvi (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*

ⁱⁱ *Deuteronomy 20: 1-9 (KJV).*

ⁱⁱⁱ *St. Luke 9: 57-62 (KJV); cf. St. Matthew 8: 18-22.*

^{iv} *St. Luke 9: 62 (KJV).*

^v *It has been pointed out that this was allowance was for a five-year period, R. K. Harrison, Deuteronomy, in D. GUTHRIE AND J. A. MOTYER, EDS., THE NEW BIBLE COMMENTARY: REVISED, 3rd ed. 222 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1970), citing Leviticus 19: 23-25.*

^{vi} *Harrison, op. cit.*

^{vii} *St. Matthew 8: 19.*

^{viii} *R. E. Nixon, Matthew, in GUTHRIE AND MOTYER, op. cit. 827.*

^{ix} *I. H. Marshall, Luke, in GUTHRIE AND MOTYER, op. cit. 904.*

^x *Nixon, op. cit.; Marshall, op. cit.*

^{xi} *Marshall, op. cit.*

^{xii} *Assisting Priest, 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.*