

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER

All Saints' Day (November 1)¹

Lessons:

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the third Chapter of the Wisdom of Solomon.²

“But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and there shall no torment touch them. In the sight of the unwise they seemed to die: and their departure is taken for misery, And their going from us to be utter destruction: but they are in peace. For though they be punished in the sight of men, yet is their hope full of immortality. And having been a little chastised, they shall be greatly rewarded: for God proved them, and found them worthy for himself. As gold in the furnace hath he tried them, and received them as a burnt offering. And in the time of their visitation they shall shine, and run to and fro like sparks among the stubble. They shall judge the nations, and have dominion over the people, and their Lord shall reign for ever. They that put their trust in him shall understand the truth: and such as be faithful in love shall abide with him: for grace and mercy is to his saints, and he hath care for his elect.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

Second Lesson: Here beginneth the nineteenth Chapter of the Revelation of St. John the Divine.

“And after these things I heard a great voice of much people in heaven, saying, Alleluia; Salvation, and glory, and honour, and power, unto the Lord our God: For true and righteous are his judgments: for he hath judged the great whore, which did corrupt the earth with her fornication, and hath avenged the blood of his servants at her hand. And again they said, Alleluia. And her smoke rose up for ever and ever. And the four and twenty elders and the four beasts fell down and worshipped God that sat on the throne, saying, Amen; Alleluia. And a voice came out of the throne, saying, Praise our God, all ye his servants, and ye that fear him, both small and great. And I heard as it were the

voice of a great multitude, and as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of mighty thunderings, saying, Alleluia: for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth. Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready. And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints. And he saith unto me, Write, Blessed are they which are called unto the marriage supper of the Lamb. And he saith unto me, These are the true sayings of God. And I fell at his feet to worship him. And he said unto me, See thou do it not: I am thy fellowservant, and of thy brethren that have the testimony of Jesus: worship God: for the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy. And I saw heaven opened, and behold a white horse; and he that sat upon him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he doth judge and make war. His eyes were as a flame of fire, and on his head were many crowns; and he had a name written, that no man knew, but he himself. And he was clothed with a vesture dipped in blood: and his name is called The Word of God. And the armies which were in heaven followed him upon white horses, clothed in fine linen, white and clean. And out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron: and he treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God. And he hath on his vesture and on his thigh a name written, KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Homily:

A. Sin and the human vocation.

We are in the Octave of All Saints. All Saints is a sort of “catch-all” feast for unknown holy people who don’t have their own days. However, since we are all called to be saints,³ it is, prophetically, our own feast day as well. The “multitude which no man can number of all nations, kindreds, peoples and tongues,” spoken of by St. John the Divine,⁴ is a timeless vision of all who persevere in faith through tribulation and stand victorious before God’s throne.

This is “The Communion of the Saints;” the fellowship of all who are bound together in Christ through the Spirit. It consists of all believers, whether they are currently living in the body or in the intermediate state, awaiting the Resurrection. The restoration of our relationship with God in Christ necessarily restores us to union with all who belong to him.

Sin severed our union with God but it also alienated us (and continues to alienate us) from each other. After the original sin, the next sin was that one human being killed another—a murder that was a result of offerings made to God. Abel made an offering that was accepted by God. Cain made an offering that was rejected. For that reason, Cain killed Abel. When we are restored to union with God, this pattern is reversed. In Christ, our offering is accepted and, rather than killing each other, we are reconciled and learn to work for one another’s good.

Redemption is the restoration of the human vocation that we lost through sin. We were made to be priests and kings of the creation. We were made to take the creation that God gave us and offer it back to God in thanksgiving; and we were made to rule over the creation righteously. The paradox is that only when we give the creation back to God as an offering in thanksgiving—only when we let go of the creation—do we fully possess it and rule over it. When we hold on to the creation, it becomes an idol, and it rules over us.

B. The story of Cain and Abel and its implications.

Let us look at the story of Cain and Abel. Genesis tells us, “In the process of time it came to pass that Cain brought an offering of the fruit of the ground to the Lord. Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat. And the Lord respected Abel and his offering, but He did not respect Cain and his offering.”⁵

The language of Genesis 4 suggests the problem. Abel offered the first and best of his flock. The first and best represents the whole. By this offering, Abel exercised his priestly duty. He took what God had given him and he offered it back to God in thanksgiving. God accepted and blessed Abel and his offering. Cain brought “an offering.” Cain

knew he was supposed to give, but did not want to; so he brought something he thought he could spare.

This attitude is a consequence of the fall. Fallen man says of the creation, “This is mine.” He clings tightly to the creation as though he were the owner and not a steward, as though it were a possession and not a gift. As the author of Hebrews says, “By faith, Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he received approval as righteous, God bearing witness by accepting his gifts”.⁶

Throughout the Bible, the righteous follow in Abel’s footsteps by giving back to God the first and best of what God gives to them. The first and best is represented by the tithe. Abraham tithed to Melchizedek.⁷ Jacob made the following vow to God: “Of all that thou givest me I will surely give the tenth to thee”.⁸ Various tithes were established in the Torah, the chief of which went to support the ministry of the Priests and Levites in the Temple.⁹

At the end of the Old Testament, when the Temple languished because Israel neglected to tithe, God accused His people of robbing him and God promised that if His people would repent and give the tithe, He would pour down His blessing upon them.¹⁰ In the New Testament, Jesus criticized the hypocrisy of the scribes and Pharisees but He commended their meticulous practice of tithing.¹¹ It is the will of God that the ministry of the church, which is the temple of the Holy Spirit and the successor to the Old Testament temple, be supported by the tithes of the people of God.

We tithe when we take the income God gives to us and give the first tenth as an offering to God. The tithe should be the first check we write. This is how we imitate Abel and offer God our first and or best. This is one way we fulfill our vocation as priests of the creation.

Some will say, “I can’t afford to tithe.” Of course, this is literally false; the first and best are always there to give. What this really means is, “I am afraid that if I tithe I won’t have enough left over for the rest of my needs.” This is precisely what makes the tithe an expression of faith. We give God the first and best trusting that God will make the rest sufficient to meet our needs. As the author of Hebrews says, “Without

faith it is impossible to please [God], for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.”¹²

God’s faithfulness is illustrated by story of the prophet Elijah and widow of Zarephath. During a severe famine, Elijah asked the widow for food. She told Elijah that she only had a little food . She was about to prepare for herself and her son as a sort of last meal before they died of hunger. Elijah told her, “Do not fear; go and do as you have said, but make me a small cake from it first, and bring it to me; and afterward make some for yourself and your son. For thus says the Lord God of Israel: ‘The bin of flour shall not be used up, nor shall the jar of oil run dry, until the day the Lord sends rain on the earth.’”

First Kings tells us, “She went away and did according to the word of Elijah; and she and he and her household ate for many days.”¹³ The widow gave first to God, and the rest was made sufficient to meet her needs.

C. The corporate dimension of tithing.

Our stated mission is, “To follow Christ, to worship God every Sunday in his church, and to work and pray and give for the spread of his kingdom”.¹⁴ This means that it is the mission of each of us to use our gifts in service, to take our part in church’s life of prayer and to support the church with our tithes—and with other offerings as we are able.

Our participation in the mission of the church is not just for our own benefit; it is our part of the mission and work of the church. If any of us fails to do our part, the mission of the church is less powerful than it ought to be. The church is the army of God, and if any soldier in God’s army does not man his post and fulfill his calling, we are less able to fight and conquer the enemy.

People sometimes ask how they can help the church; they are looking for some special thing they can do. However, what the church really needs is not so much the periodic act of heroism; what the church really needs is for all of its members to be committed to our mission, to

be faithful in the regular habits of following Christ, worshiping God and working, praying and giving for the spread of His kingdom.

Ordinary faithfulness makes people heroes in the church. What God has done through the ministry of St. Matthew's Church has been made possible by those who have been faithful, year in and year out, to take their part in our mission. This is particularly true with regard to money. We have always been able to do more than what our size would suggest because so many of our people have been faithful in their tithing. We have often had year-end deficits erased by people who experienced financial blessing from God and, as always, were faithful to give. Expansion of our ministry is made possible when new people join us and begin to support our ministry.

We are committed as a church to mission. We believe that God is calling us to reach out beyond ourselves; and share with others what God has given to us. A church that merely wants to survive—that merely wants to pay the bills for another year—might sustain itself with an offering of some of the left over grain. But a church with a mission, the army of God dressed for battle, requires our first and our best, our tithe.

Think of the Church as a canoe and of each member as an oarsman. When all row in harmony, the mission of the Church moves forward efficiently and effectively. When some choose not to row, others have to row harder to make up for those who do not row. When some choose to be difficult, others have to row harder to make up for the oars that are dragging in the water.

As we begin to plan for next year, we are asking all of our members to get on board and row with us. We believe that God has great things in store for us. The more people who get on board, the more people who work and pray and give for the spread of the kingdom, the greater will be the works that God will do through us.

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The Rev'd Canon Stephen C. Scarlett¹⁵
November 4, 2012

¹ This sermon was originally written on the lections for Holy Communion on All Saints' Day, 2012.

² *Psalms and Lessons for the Fixed Holy Days (1943)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xlv (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

³ I Corinthians 1:2.

⁴ Revelation 7:9 (KJV).

⁵ Genesis 4:3-5.

⁶ Hebrews 11:2.

⁷ Genesis 14:18-20.

⁸ Genesis 28:20-22.

⁹ Leviticus 27:30.

¹⁰ Malachi 3:8-10.

¹¹ Matthew 23:3.

¹² Hebrews 11:6.

¹³ I Kings 17:9-16.

¹⁴ THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 291 (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

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