

## SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER

### The Second Sunday after Easter<sup>1</sup>

#### Lessons:

**The First Lesson:** Here beginneth the twenty-first Verse of the fourth Chapter of Baruch.<sup>2</sup>

“... Be of good cheer, O my children, cry unto the Lord, and he will deliver you from the power and hand of the enemies. For my hope is in the Everlasting, that he will save you; and joy is come unto me from the Holy One, because of the mercy which shall soon come unto you from the Everlasting our Saviour. For I sent you out with mourning and weeping: but God will give you to me again with joy and gladness for ever. Like as now the neighbours of Sion have seen your captivity: so shall they see shortly your salvation from our God which shall come upon you with great glory, and brightness of the Everlasting. My children, suffer patiently the wrath that is come upon you from God: for thine enemy hath persecuted thee; but shortly thou shalt see his destruction, and shalt tread upon his neck. My delicate ones have gone rough ways, and were taken away as a flock caught of the enemies. Be of good comfort, O my children, and cry unto God: for ye shall be remembered of him that brought these things upon you. For as it was your mind to go astray from God: so, being returned, seek him ten times more. For he that hath brought these plagues upon you shall bring you everlasting joy with your salvation. Take a good heart, O Jerusalem: for he that gave thee that name will comfort thee.

Here endeth the First Lesson.

**The Second Lesson:** Here beginneth the seventh Verse of the third Chapter of the Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Philippians.<sup>3</sup>

“... But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ, And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of

the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith: That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death; If by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead. Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus. Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. Let us therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded: and if in any thing ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you. Nevertheless, whereto we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us mind the same thing.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

### **Text:**

From the Second Lesson: “Our citizenship is in heaven, from whence we eagerly wait for the Savior.” In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

### **Homily:**

In today’s Second Lesson, St. Paul says, “Our citizenship is in heaven, from whence we eagerly wait for the Savior.” This statement contains a couple of digs at the politics of the day. Philippi was a military colony, full of retired and proud Roman soldiers. There would have been an air of Roman patriotism in the city. St. Paul’s emphasis on our heavenly citizenship is a caution against having too great an enthusiasm for the current order. Caesar was given the title, “Savior of the World” for the relative peace he brought to the Roman Empire. When St. Paul says that we look for the Savior to come, he is reminding his hearers of the limits of military and political salvation.

While St. Paul was confronting Roman patriotism, Jesus was speaking in Israel to an audience more hostile to Caesar. Those who

came to test him meant to create a dilemma. If Jesus said it was okay to pay taxes, he would be seen as legitimizing the despised Roman rule. If he said it was not okay to pay taxes to Rome, he would risk arrest as a political agitator. His answer put things in perspective. The coin bore Caesar's image and likeness, and therefore might rightly be rendered to Caesar. But since the whole human person bears the image and likeness of God, we should give ourselves in worship and service only to God. Thus, when Caesar demanded worship of the early Christians, they refused and chose martyrdom instead.

## **1. The meaning and implications of heavenly citizenship.**

When St. Paul spoke of heavenly citizenship, he wasn't merely offering a spiritualized dissent to Roman rule or speaking of a future existence in something called heaven. He was speaking of an actual kingdom that exists right now. The kingdom of God is ruled over by Jesus, the Lord and Savior of the world. He was crowned as king in the Ascension after he conquered sin and death on the cross. We became citizens of that kingdom in baptism. We have actual responsibilities, as citizens, to obey the king, worship God and work and pray and give for the spread of the kingdom as we wait for Jesus to come.

Moreover, our heavenly citizenship is not secondary or added on top of our connections to this world. We do not hold a dual citizenship in the kingdom of God and the city of man. Rather, the Bible describes us as "strangers and pilgrims," resident aliens in the world.<sup>4</sup> To be sure, the Bible exhorts heavenly citizens to be exemplary resident aliens in the city of man. For example, St. Peter writes,

"Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake, whether to the king as supreme, or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men—as free, yet not using liberty as a cloak for vice, but as bondservants of God. Honor all people. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king."<sup>5</sup>

We are called to submission and obedience to secular authority because we are ambassadors for the kingdom of God. We are to represent our homeland well as a matter of foreign policy.

## **2. The difficulty and opportunity for Christians in America.**

There are two particular challenges for us as we attempt to adopt and live out this Biblical framework. First, America has historically been a friendly place for Christians. It's hard to act as strangers and pilgrims when one feels very much at home. Second, this sense of being at home is slowly declining. Many Christians feel a sense of *angst* and, even, anger as they try to figure out how to get back to where we once were.

One thing seems obvious. America is not going back to where it was for the simple reason that Americans are less profoundly Christian than they once were. Some three-quarters of us still identify ourselves as Christians. But this shared faith is highly diluted and individualized. The former national consensus about the moral order of universe has given way to a general sense that all should be free to do as they please as long as no apparent harm is done. Deists and Baptists of the colonial era had more in common than do many Christians today.

There is opportunity in this change of circumstances to more fully embrace the Biblical model. It is increasingly evident that we are, indeed, like Abraham, strangers and pilgrims, resident aliens in this world. The church has a greater opportunity to fulfill its vocation when it is not at home in the world and, thus, sets its sights more clearly on the world to come. This is precisely what St. Paul is saying. We are not citizens of earth looking for Caesar to save us. We are citizens of the heavenly city, eagerly waiting for our king to come.

When vibrant and committed Christian faith declines, eternal goals are replaced with temporal ones. Thus, for the last generation cutting edge Christianity has been eager to show how the kingdom of God can have a positive, practical impact on this world. The result has been, largely, that Christian faith has no impact at all; or, it has resulted in the

appearance that Christian faith has failed because it did not produce some desired temporal result.

Christian renewal requires that the Christian hope—the coming of Christ, the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come—be restored as the goal; and it requires that we begin to look at life in this world in terms of how it serves the goal of eternal life. As C. S. Lewis wrote, “Aim at heaven and you will get earth thrown in. Aim at earth and you get neither.”

### **3. The Kingdom of God and prayer.**

Living life now in light of eternity requires a serious commitment to the life of prayer. This is not just a commitment to pray for things. It is a commitment to live out the reality of our status as heavenly citizens. Ephesians tells us that God “raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus”.<sup>6</sup> In Christ, we are restored to our vocation as kings and priests, and we exercise this vocation through prayer. Through prayer, we offer the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving; and through prayer, we reign with Christ over the world.

The practice of prayer has suffered greatly from the focus on time instead of eternity. People are always praying for short term, practical benefits rather than eternal salvation, progress in virtue and the larger purposes of the kingdom. Consequently, there are many small, temporal miracles, but little evident holiness and power in the Church.

People don’t commit themselves to the life of prayer because it seems to have no practical impact; it gets in the way of “doing” things. This is precisely the problem. When eternity becomes the servant of time, the framework of prayer is turned upside down. Christian prayer is not the way to get things done in time. Christian prayer is the way that time is continually lifted up into eternity; it is the way we learn to live in the present moment in the light of the eternal victory.

When we focus on the temporal, we get caught up in the false urgencies and emergencies of the kingdom of man and we get anxious,

fearful and angry. Conversely, when we lift up our hearts to the Lord, when we continually ascend into heaven and take our place among the elect of God, when we take all of life and offer it to God in Christ, things change. Then we become new people. We look at life in a new way; and, strangely, we are able to have a greater impact in the world. Prayer gives us new power because it aligns our desires and goals with the will and purposes of God.

One thing we learn through prayer is that God's time horizon is different than ours. God is not in a hurry. Our crises are not his crises; our deadlines are not his deadlines. With the Lord, a thousand years is as a day and a day is as a thousand years.<sup>7</sup> He is doing what He is doing, and He always accomplishes his will. Prayer gets us on board with him—it does not work the other way.

Think of it this way. The Church gathers around the altar on the Lord's Day, as the outpost on earth of the kingdom of God, to exercise its priestly and kingly vocation. It has continued to do this for two thousand years through the rise and fall of various editions of the city of man; through the fall of Jerusalem and the Roman Empire; through periods of intense persecution and relative peace; through the dark ages and times of human flourishing; through the emergence and overthrow of various enemies of God. Through all of this, Jesus has remained Lord of the creation. Through all of this, the Church has reigned with Him through prayer, enduring faithfully through persecution, offering praise and thanksgiving for God's blessings and praying for justice and the needs of the world. And through all of this the Church is constantly reminded, "The Lord is in his holy temple. Let all the earth keep silence before him".<sup>8</sup>

## **Conclusion:**

As we habitually enter into God's presence through prayer, we learn to experience God's joy and peace. We learn that God is concerned for the world, but He is not worried about it. He is slowly but surely accomplishing His purposes as we move toward the final victory over death.<sup>9</sup> Through prayer, we discover that it is not God's will for us to be anxious, fearful and angry. We learn that God wants us to

faithfully pray for God's will to be done in the world, to do the good that He calls each of us to do, and trust Him for the results that He will accomplish in his good time. For,

“Our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself.”

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The Rev'd Canon Stephen C. Scarlett<sup>10</sup>  
November 11, 2012

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<sup>1</sup> This sermon was originally written on the Epistle for Holy Communion on the Twenty-Third Sunday after Trinity, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> *Baruch* 4:21-30 (KJV).

<sup>3</sup> *Philippians* 3:7-16 (KJV).

<sup>4</sup> *I Peter* 2:11.

<sup>5</sup> *I Peter* 2:13-17.

<sup>6</sup> *Ephesians* 2:6.

<sup>7</sup> *II Peter* 3:8.

<sup>8</sup> *Habakkuk* 2:20.

<sup>9</sup> *I Corinthians* 15:25-26.

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