

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER

The Ascension¹

The Rev. Warren E. Shaw, Priest-in-Charge

Lessons:²

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the ninth Verse of the seventh Chapter of the Book of Daniel.³

“I beheld till the thrones were cast down, and the Ancient of days did sit, whose garment was white as snow, and the hair of his head like the pure wool: his throne was like the fiery flame, and his wheels as burning fire. A fiery stream issued and came forth from before him: thousand thousands ministered unto him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him: the judgment was set, and the books were opened. ... I saw in the night visions, and, behold, one like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days, and they brought him near before him. And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him: his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the fourth Chapter of the Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Ephesians.⁴

“I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; One Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all. But unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ. Wherefore he saith, When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men. (Now that he ascended, what is it but that he also descended first into the lower parts of the earth? He that descended is the same also that ascended up far above all heavens, that he might fill all things.) And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints,

for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ: That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “I ... beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called....”⁵ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Homily:

That word “vocation” is one of several that have been coöpted and redefined by the Church of Rome. The word “Catholic” is another. The word “Church” is another. The word “Saint” is another.

I would love to tell you what each of those words really means apart from their Roman redefinitions. I would especially like to tell you how those words are used in the Scriptures and in the traditions of the churches that are not under papal jurisdiction, but each of those words deserves a sermon of its own and I certainly cannot cover all of them this morning. So I am simply going to focus on the one that is prominent in the Second Lesson for today. That word is “vocation”.

A vocation is a calling, specifically from God, to undertake a mission or to enter into a certain way of life. For Roman Catholics that means entering the priesthood or becoming a nun or a monk. When Rome talks about praying for vocations or about a rise or fall in vocations, that’s what it means.

Martin Luther broadened the definition of a vocation to include any activity that someone was called by God to engage in. Some were called to be shoemakers,

some were called to be farmers, and so forth. Whatever a man believed he was destined to do and was willing to do to the glory of God was a vocation.

I like Luther and I agree with him as far as he goes but I believe he does not go far enough. There is an element of compulsion in a true vocation that never goes away.

St. Paul begins this portion of his Epistle by calling himself “the prisoner of the Lord”. He wrote this letter from a Roman prison, so he may simply mean that he is in jail because of his testimony to Christ. But I think he means more than that. I think he means that he cannot escape from his calling to be an Apostle. “Woe is me,” he says in I Corinthians, “if I preach not the gospel.”

All the priests I have talked to about the subject when they first heard the call to this way of life said “No!” “No I can’t do that and I don’t want to do it.” But the call kept coming back and kept getting louder until finally they realized that the call was not going to go away and there would be no peace until they said “Yes.” There was no place to hide and nothing else they could do. They were prisoners of Christ.

That is one of the marks of a true vocation, but it is not only clergy who experience it. I know a man who retired as a University dean. From time to time he is called out of retirement to take over a college somewhere that is in some kind of temporary trouble. He always says, “Yes” because he knows those phone calls are calls from God and he has no choice but to respond. You can retire from a career, but you can’t retire from a vocation.

I myself have come out of retirement three times in order to take charge of a parish. That’s the difference between a vocation and a career.

And you too have a vocation. You too have been called of God to a certain way of life, and there will be no peace in your life until you embrace it. You are called to be saints. You are called to be salt in a world that is in decay. You are called be light in a world of darkness. You have been called, as Abraham was called, to be strangers and pilgrims in the world on a journey to a land that has yet to be revealed.

You have been called as the Jews were called out of Egypt to establish a community ruled by the laws of God. You have been called, as the Apostles were

called, to follow Christ and learn His ways. Sometimes that means leaving behind familiar places and people. It always means leaving behind old habits that are appropriate to the life of the world but are not appropriate for citizens of the Kingdom of God. All of that is what the Apostle means when he says, “I beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called”.

The Apostle is not just writing to clergy, and it is not just clergy who are called to a godly life. “There is one body and one Spirit,” he says, “... One Lord, one faith, one baptism.” Clergy and laity alike share in that faith. We all take the same baptismal vows: to “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.” To follow Christ as Savior and Lord and to walk in his ways. We all took those vows.

Some of us took additional vows such as ordination vows or marriage vows. Those vows give us a special status or function within the community of faith but they do not by any means separate us from it. We are all in this together. Clergy and laity, married and single, women and men, we are all in this together.

Some of you are older than I am. Most of you are younger. But it doesn't matter. The vows we have taken have no expiration date. You may someday retire if you have not already done so from whatever career you have chosen, but you can never retire from the vocation to which you have been called.

“With all lowliness and meekness, with long-suffering, forbearing one another in love” I beseech you to walk in a manner that is worthy of that vocation.

And to help you do that I offer once again the Collect for today. Understand that “prevent” in Cranmer's usage means “go ahead of” or “precede”. Let us pray.

“Lord, we pray thee that thy grace may always prevent and follow us, and make us continually to be given to all good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”

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¹ *This sermon was originally written on the Epistle for Holy Communion on the Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity, 2012.*

² *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxiv (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*

³ *Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14 (KJV).*

⁴ *Ephesians 4:1-16 (KJV).*

⁵ *Ephesians 4:1a (KJV).*