

Sermon for Evening Prayer: Epiphany Iⁱ

The Reverend Warren E. Shaw, Priest Associate

Lessons: ⁱⁱ

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the forty-ninth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.ⁱⁱⁱ

“Listen, O isles, unto me; and hearken, ye people, from far; The LORD hath called me from the womb; from the bowels of my mother hath he made mention of my name. And he hath made my mouth like a sharp sword; in the shadow of his hand hath he hid me, and made me a polished shaft; in his quiver hath he hid me; And said unto me, Thou art my servant, O Israel, in whom I will be glorified. Then I said, I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for nought, and in vain: yet surely my judgment is with the LORD, and my work with my God.

“And now, saith [SETH] the LORD that formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob again to him, Though Israel be not gathered, yet shall I be glorious in the eyes of the LORD, and my God shall be my strength. And he said, It is a light thing that thou shouldest be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel: I will also give thee for a light to the Gentiles, that thou mayest be my salvation unto the end of the earth. Thus saith [SETH] the LORD, the Redeemer of Israel, and his Holy One, to him whom man despiseth, to him whom the nation abhorreth, to a servant of rulers, Kings shall see and arise, princes also shall worship, because of the LORD that is faithful, and the Holy One of Israel, and he shall choose thee.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the first Chapter of the First Epistle General of John.^{iv}

“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life; (For the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and shew [SHOW] unto you that eternal

life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us;) That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ. And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full. This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth: But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “That which we have seen and heard we declare also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us.”^v In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Homily:

When the Church says that, the Church is strong. When the church is unable to say that, or is preoccupied with other things, then the church is weak and is in danger of losing its very identity.

The Church was born as a witnessing community. It was formed and trained and called and empowered to testify of Jesus Christ. The Church can, in fact, be defined as that group of people who have experienced the power of God and are prepared to tell about that experience.

Back in Old Testament times, when the Jews were slaves in Egypt, God called Moses to be His spokesman and to say to the people, “Now you will see what I am going to do.”

Indeed they did see. They saw the plagues visited on Egypt, forcing the Pharaoh to let them go. They saw the Red Sea pull back to allow them to cross. They saw the pillar of fire and the pillar of cloud that led them through the desert, and they heard and saw the thunder and lightening at Mt. Sinai when Moses received the Ten Commandments. The Jews were witnesses to all these things and were commanded to tell their children about them. They also told their story whenever anyone asked them about their religion. The rites and sacraments they developed, from Passover to Booths to Purim to Hanukkah, involved bearing witness to what God had done for them at various times.

“You are my witnesses,” says the Lord in Isaiah 43:10, and this theme carries through into the New Testament, where Jesus calls out twelve men (representing the twelve tribes of Israel) to be His witnesses. These men travel with him. They hear His words and observe His acts. He constantly points out to them how the Old Testament Scriptures are fulfilled in Him.

The Apostles witness the death and resurrection of Jesus. They see Him ascend into heaven, but not until after He has left them with these words, “You shall receive power when the Holy Ghost has come upon you, and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and to the uttermost part of the earth.”

The Gospels are the written testimony of the Apostles, a witness that they sealed with their blood. And we who have received their testimony have been empowered by the Holy Spirit in Confirmation to be their successors. We are part of a witnessing community, a community that not only passes along the testimony of the Apostles, but also testifies to our own personal experience of the power and wisdom and love of God.

What has God done for you? How has He blessed you? How has He empowered you to accomplish things? How has He healed you, and strengthened you, and guided you in your life? How has He changed your life? This too is part of your testimony – the testimony every Christian is called to offer to a curious and skeptical world.

The Church at its best bears witness to Christ in three directions. The first is inwardly to itself. That is largely the work of the clergy. It is our job as clergy to preserve the apostolic witness and to protect it from those who would misinterpret it or change it. We vow at our ordination to instruct the people under our care in the doctrine and discipline of Christ, basing that instruction on the Holy Scriptures. We further vow “to banish and drive away from the church all erroneous and strange doctrine contrary to God’s Word.” There are other things we are called to do as well, but this is primarily what we clergy are set apart to do.

The second direction in which the Church bears witness to Christ is on the instruction of the young. That is primarily the work of parents, God parents, and teachers. It has often been pointed out that the Church is but one generation away from extinction. That should be quite obvious to this congregation, and one of the first things we need to do when we get into our own building is to start a Sunday school and develop other programs to pass on to the next generation the apostolic witness, as well as our own personal testimony. If we fail to do that, we will have squandered our inheritance and we will die without heirs or successors.

Finally, the Church at its best bears witness to Christ in the world outside itself. That is not the work of professional evangelists or missionaries. That is the work of all God’s people. It is the work of everyone who has an experience of Christ. It is the work of the church as a whole.

We are not called upon to argue with people. We are not called upon to judge other people’s behavior. We are called upon to tell people what we have heard, what we have seen, and what we have experienced of God in our lives. We are called upon to walk in the footsteps of the Apostles and say, “That which we have seen and heard we declare also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us.”

People think of the church as a voluntary association. But the truth is that we are here because we were called here by God. The church was not created by men. It was created by God and it was created for a purpose. That purpose is to be a witnessing community to the acts of

God. If that is not what we are, then we indeed are just another voluntary association, and as such we have no right to call ourselves a church.

--oo0oo--

St. David's Anglican Church
Charlottesville, Virginia
December 27, 2009

ⁱ “Any set of Psalms and Lessons appointed for the evening of any day may be read at the morning service, and any set of morning Psalms and Lessons may be read in the evening.” *Concerning the Service of the Church, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER* viii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

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

ⁱⁱⁱ *Isaiah 49:1-7* (KJV).

^{iv} *I John 1:1-9* (KJV).

^v *I John 1:3* (RSV).