

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER

The Third Sunday after the Epiphany

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

Lessons:ⁱ

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the eighteenth Verse of the sixteenth Chapter of the Fifth Book of Moses, Called Deuteronomy.ⁱⁱ

“Judges and officers shalt thou make thee in all thy gates, which the LORD thy God giveth thee, throughout thy tribes: and they shall judge the people with just judgment. Thou shalt not wrest judgment; thou shalt not respect persons, neither take a gift: for a gift doth blind the eyes of the wise, and pervert the words of the righteous. That which is altogether just shalt thou follow, that thou mayest live, and inherit the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee.

“....

“If there arise a matter too hard for thee in judgment, between blood and blood, between plea and plea, and between stroke and stroke, being matters of controversy within thy gates: then shalt thou arise, and get thee up into the place which the LORD thy God shall choose; And thou shalt come unto the priests the Levites, and unto the judge that shall be in those days, and enquire; and they shall shew [SHOW] thee the sentence of judgment: And thou shalt do according to the sentence, which they of that place which the LORD shall choose shall shew [SHOW] thee; and thou shalt observe to do according to all that they inform thee: According to the sentence of the law which they shall teach thee, and according to the judgment which they shall tell thee, thou shalt do: thou shalt not decline from the sentence which they shall shew [SHOW] thee, to the right hand, nor to the left.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the second Chapter of the General Epistle of James.ⁱⁱⁱ

“My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with respect of persons. For if there come unto your assembly a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment; And ye have respect to him that weareth the gay clothing, and say unto him, Sit thou here in a good place; and say to the poor, Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool: Are ye not then partial in yourselves, and are become judges of evil thoughts? Hearken, my beloved brethren, Hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he hath promised to them that love him? But ye have despised the poor. Do not rich men oppress you, and draw you before the judgment seats? Do not they blaspheme that worthy name by the which ye are called? If ye fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself, ye do well: But if ye have respect to persons, ye commit sin, and are convinced of the law as transgressors. For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all. For he that said, Do not commit adultery, said also, Do not kill. Now if thou commit no adultery, yet if thou kill, thou art become a transgressor of the law. So speak ye, and so do, as they that shall be judged by the law of liberty. For he shall have judgment without mercy, that hath shewed [SHOWD] no mercy; and mercy rejoiceth against judgment.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “My brethren, show no partiality as you hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. For if a man with gold rings and in fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, ‘Have a seat here, please,’ while you say to the poor man, ‘Stand there,’ or ‘Sit at my feet,’ have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brethren. Has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which he has promised to those who love him?”^{iv}

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.
Amen.

Homily:

There is a story about a deacon who was arrested by an ambitious king. The king needed money, as rulers always do, and he knew that the deacon was in charge of the Church's money. So he put the deacon in a dungeon and threatened to torture him until he turned over the Church's treasure. The deacon promised that if he were released he would return the next day with the Church's treasure.

The next day when the deacon showed up, the king demanded to see the treasure. "Look out the window," said the deacon.

When the king looked out the window he saw an assembly of people. Some were blind. Some were crippled. Some were children. Some were old. All of them were obviously poor.

"What is this?" roared the king. "That, your majesty," replied the deacon, "is the treasure of the Church."

I don't know if that story is true, but I do know that it illustrates an important difference between the Church and the world. The world values material wealth; the Church values people, especially the poor and other outcasts of society.

The Church values such people because God values them.

It is certainly true that, in carrying out His ministry, Jesus Himself was glad to accept the hospitality and the financial support of wealthy and prominent people. The Church, in its earliest days, met in the homes of wealthy and prominent people, and collected money from them to support its work. But is also true that Jesus sought out the company of society's outcasts, and the Gospel found a much more receptive audience among the poor than among the rich.

There are reasons for that, and one of the reasons, I think, is that poor people are much more aware of their vulnerability than wealthy people are, and are less inclined to think of themselves as self-sufficient. A sense of dependence on the largess of other people is easily translated into dependence on the goodness and mercy of God.

That is why Jesus, in the Beatitudes, declares the poor to be blessed, and says, on the other hand, that it is difficult for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.

Certainly many who are poor in the usual sense are poor in the spiritual sense as well. Faith does not come automatically with poverty. Certainly there are those who are wealthy in the usual sense and are spiritually wealthy as well. Jesus said it is difficult for a rich man to enter the kingdom of Heaven. He did not say it is impossible.

That is why St. Matthew adds a key phrase to the first of the Beatitudes. Where St. Luke has Jesus say, “Blessed are you who are poor,” St. Matthew has Him say, “Blessed are the poor in spirit.”

In the cultural milieu of the Roman Empire, class distinctions were important and were rigidly observed. It was difficult for converts in the First Century to understand that God does not observe such distinctions and the Church should not recognize them either.

St. Paul writes about that when he says in a famous verse from Galatians, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female; for ye are all one in Christ.”

St. James writes about it also in the Second Lesson for today:

“[I]f a man with gold rings and in fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, ‘Have a seat here, please,’ while you say to the poor man, ‘Stand there,’ or ‘Sit at my feet,’ have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?”

He then goes on to ask, “Has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which he has promised to those who love him?” The answer is yes. The poor have no other inheritance than the kingdom that God has promised.

No one in this parish is poor in the usual economic sense. We all have comfortable homes. We all have enough to eat and to wear. We

all have resources we can call upon to sustain us and a surplus that we can share with others. And we do share. We are “mindful of the needs of others” as we say in a familiar grace before meals. The budget that will shortly be presented to you will reflect that.

But in a spiritual sense we are all beggars. We are all without the resources we need to sustain our souls, except in so far as God provides what we need. And God does provide what we need. He feeds us with spiritual food at His table. He ransoms us from the clutches of sin into which we have fallen. He purchases with His own blood our deliverance from death. Left to our own resources, we would surely perish.

Left to our own resources, we would become like the king in the story who demanded the Church’s treasure, or like the man in the parable who built bigger storage facilities to accommodate all his wealth, only to die before he could enjoy that wealth. Left to our own resources, our souls would suffocate in a sea of treasure whose shelf life is limited to our earthly life span. It is only when we become aware of our genuine poverty and our total dependence on the mercy of God that we become the heirs of everlasting life.

“Has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which he has promised to those who love him?” The answer is yes.

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St. David’s Anglican Catholic Church
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ⁱ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xiv (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*

ⁱⁱ *Deuteronomy 16:18-20 & 17:8-11 (KJV).*

ⁱⁱⁱ *James 2:1-13 (KJV).*

^{iv} *James 2:1-5 (RSV).*