

SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYER¹
The Tenth Sunday after Trinity²

The Rev. Warren E. Shaw, Supply Priest³

Lessons:⁴

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the forty-fourth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.⁵

“Yet now hear, O Jacob my servant; and Israel, whom I have chosen: Thus saith [SETH] the LORD that made thee, and formed thee from the womb, which will help thee; Fear not, O Jacob, my servant; and thou, Jesurun [jeh-SHOE-runn], whom I have chosen. For I will pour water upon him that is thirsty, and floods upon the dry ground: I will pour my spirit upon thy seed, and my blessing upon thine offspring: And they shall spring up as among the grass, as willows by the water courses. One shall say, I am the LORD’s; and another shall call himself by the name of Jacob; and another shall subscribe with his hand unto the LORD, and surname himself by the name of Israel. Thus saith [SETH] the LORD the King of Israel, and his redeemer the LORD of hosts; I am the first, and I am the last; and beside me there is no God. And who, as I, shall call, and shall declare it, and set it in order for me, since I appointed the ancient people? and the things that are coming, and shall come, let them shew [SHOW] unto them. Fear ye not, neither be afraid: have not I told thee from that time, and have declared it? ye are even my witnesses. Is there a God beside me? yea, there is no God; I know not any.

“...

“Remember these, O Jacob and Israel; for thou art my servant: I have formed thee; thou art my servant: O Israel, thou shalt not be forgotten of me. I have blotted out, as a thick cloud, thy transgressions, and, as a cloud, thy sins: return unto me; for I have redeemed thee. Sing, O ye heavens; for the LORD hath done it: shout, ye lower parts of the earth: break forth into singing, ye mountains, O forest, and every tree therein: for the LORD hath redeemed Jacob, and glorified himself in Israel.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the twelfth Chapter of the Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Romans.⁶

“I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God. For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith. For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office: So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith; Or ministry, let us wait on our ministering: or he that teacheth, on teaching; Or he that exhorteth, on exhortation: he that giveth, let him do it with simplicity; he that ruleth, with diligence; he that sheweth [**SHOW-eth**] mercy, with cheerfulness. Let love be without dissimulation. Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “Do not be conformed to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may perceive the will of God -- what is good and acceptable and perfect.”⁷ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Homily:

The spirit of the age is the spirit of the time and place in which we live, and that is a better rendering of the Greek than appears in the Prayer Book. The spirit of the age, what the Germans call “The Zeitgeist”, is the prevailing mood of the culture, the predominant way of understanding the world and dealing with life. The spirit of the age defines what is good and what is true and what is desirable and

what constitutes acceptable behavior. It will tolerate some deviation, up to a point, but generally the spirit of the age insists on conformity to its ideals and definitions of right and wrong.

Some people say that the spirit of the age in which we live is lawless and without any sense of direction, but I disagree with that. There are always rules, and there are always standards. Even what is called “the law of the jungle” is a law that wild animals obey.

There was a time in this country when the spirit of the age was basically Christian, or at least Judeo-Christian. People were taught to keep their promises and commitments, to respect each other’s property, and to seek ways other than lawsuits to settle disputes. They were taught to be gentle and helpful to the poor and the sick and the weak. They were taught to say their prayers and to go to church, to work hard and to take responsibility for their children as well as for their own actions.

There was a time when stores and theaters were closed on Sundays. The Bible was read in public schools. Some of us grew up in that cultural environment. When that was the spirit of the age, it was relatively easy to be a Christian.

But in Paul’s day, as in the present day, the spirit of the age was pagan. The culture defined “good” in pagan terms. Christians were tolerated as long as they conformed to prevailing cultural norms and behaviors. In private they could believe and worship as they wished, but in public they had to pay homage to the emperor and participate in public life according to the standards and practices of the day. The problems came then, as they do now, when those standards and practices conflicted with the behavior that the Gospel requires of Christians.

Seeing that there were differences between the spirit of the age and the spirit of Christ, St. Paul wrote these words to the Christian community in Rome: “Do not be conformed to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may perceive the will of God -- what is good and acceptable and perfect.” St. Paul wanted the church to play up rather than play down the differences between Christians and non-Christians. In that respect he was following his Master. Jesus said,

“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you”.

If there is no difference between Christians and non-Christians, then what is the point of being a Christian? If Jesus makes no difference in your life, then why were you baptized and why are you here? It is our duty as a Christian community to demonstrate, not just to talk about, but to demonstrate what is good and acceptable and perfect. How can we do that when we ourselves are imperfect? The Apostle tells us: “Do not be conformed to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.”

Our minds need to be renewed because they are clouded by sin and confused by the spirit of the age. Adam and Eve knew what was right, but Satan planted doubt in their minds, just as popular culture plants doubts in our minds. Can it really be wrong to have sex outside of the bonds of matrimony when so many people are doing it, and the government says it’s all right, and psychiatrists and educators and professional counselors say it’s all right, and movies and television glorify it, and teen-agers think of it as a basic right of passage from childhood to adulthood? Can killing a child in the womb really be wrong when the Supreme Court of the United States says it is the right of the mother to do so if she wishes?

One can almost hear the voice of the serpent in the Garden of Eden: “Did God really say?” It is only when our minds are renewed that we are able to see with clarity what is really the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect. But how can our minds be renewed in the present cultural environment? The Apostle tells us: “I appeal to you, therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”

We tend to think that prayer is ineffective if we are merely saying words. We tend to think that it does no good to be physically present in church or to receive the sacrament if our minds are not focused and our emotions are not involved. We think that way because we are influenced by the pagan idea that the soul and the body are separate entities. But Paul says that by presenting our bodies we participate in spiritual worship, and by so doing our minds are renewed.

When we were baptized, our bodies were presented to God in the presence of the Church. When we kneel or stand to pray, we present our bodies before the Lord. We present our hands and our open mouths to receive the sacrament of Holy Communion. We present our bodies to be present in Bible study classes. When there is a service to be performed, we present our bodies to perform it. Over time, if we continue to present our bodies in these ways, our minds are renewed and our lives are transformed.

It doesn't happen all at once, and it doesn't happen quickly, but the discipline of going through the motions day after day, week after week, and year after year brings about important changes in our lives. We gradually perceive more clearly what God wills for us -- what is good and acceptable and perfect. The more clearly we perceive it, the more convincingly we can demonstrate it to the world.

On the other hand, when we present our bodies for sex outside of marriage; when we present our bodies to get high on drugs or booze; when we present our bodies to be adorned in fashionable clothes and jewelry; when we present our bodies at concerts and sporting events instead of presenting them in church; we are offering living sacrifices to the spirit of the age. Over time our minds become clouded. We can no longer see what is right. We become conformed to the spirit of the age, whatever it may be, because our souls and bodies affect each other.

The spirit of this age is self-centeredness and pleasure; the spirit of Christ is discipline and the emptying of self, as the Gospel clearly teaches. The spirit of this age is money and power; the spirit of Christ is sacrifice and service. The spirit of this age is getting; the spirit of Christ is giving. The spirit of this age is competitiveness; the spirit of Christ is mutual assistance. The spirit of this age is short term immediate gratification, because there is no belief in an afterlife. The spirit of Christ is confident of everlasting life and looks to long term reward and fulfillment. The spirit of this age is asserting rights and claiming privileges; the spirit of Christ is foregoing rights and privileges, even as He Himself did when He came into the world.

St. Paul goes on to mention some of the gifts of God that are given by grace to those who follow Christ. He urges us to use those gifts for the common good: “if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; he who teaches, in his teaching; he who exhorts, in exhortation; he who contributes, in liberality; he who gives aid, with zeal; he who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.”

Conclusion:

If we use the gifts we have, you see, we will develop more. If we worship daily, our minds will be renewed. If we follow the spirit of Christ, we will not be caught up and tossed about and deformed by the spirit of the age.

“I appeal to you, therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may perceive the will of God -- what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

ooOOoo

St. Alban's Anglican Catholic Church
Richmond, Virginia
January 11, 2009

¹ “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).

² This sermon was originally written on the Gospel for Holy Communion on the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A, according to the Revised Three-Year Common Lectionary, 2005.

³ Priest Associate, St. David's Anglican Catholic Church, Charlottesville, Virginia.

⁴ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxxi (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

⁵ Isaiah 44:1-8, 21-23 (KJV).

⁶ Romans 12:1-9 (KJV).

⁷ Romans 12:2.