

# **SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER THE FOURTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY**

**The Reverend Warren E. Shaw, Priest Associate**

## **Lessons:**<sup>i</sup>

**The First Lesson:** Here beginneth the sixth Chapter of Micah:<sup>ii</sup>

“Hear ye now what the LORD saith [**SETH**]; Arise, contend thou before the mountains, and let the hills hear thy voice. Hear ye, O mountains, the LORD’s controversy, and ye strong foundations of the earth: for the LORD hath a controversy with his people, and he will plead with Israel. O my people, what have I done unto thee? and wherein have I wearied thee? testify against me. For I brought thee up out of the land of Egypt, and redeemed thee out of the house of servants; and I sent before thee Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. O my people, remember now what Balak [**BAY-lack**] king of Moab consulted, and what Balaam [**BAY-lumm**] the son of Beor [**BEA-oar**] answered him from Shittim [**SHITT-imm**] unto Gilgal [**GILL-gal**]; that ye may know the righteousness of the LORD.

“Wherewith shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before the high God? shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves of a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousands of rivers of oil? shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He hath shewed [**SHOWD**] thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

**The Second Lesson:** Here beginneth the fourth Verse of the fourth Chapter of the Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Philippians:<sup>iii</sup>

“. . . Rejoice in the Lord alway: and again I say, Rejoice. Let your moderation be known unto all men. The Lord is at hand. Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things. Those things, which ye have both learned, and received, and heard, and seen in me, do: and the God of peace shall be with you. But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly, that now at the last your care of me hath flourished again; wherein ye were also careful, but ye lacked opportunity. Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content. I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: every where and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

**Text:**

From the First Lesson: “He has showed thee, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?”<sup>iv</sup>

**Homily:**

Jesus taught us to call God “Our Father” but in this morning’s passage from the Old Testament, He sounds more like a Jewish mother.

Jewish mothers are experts at making themselves out as victims and laying guilt trips on their children. That’s how God starts out in this passage: “O my people, what have I done unto thee? And wherein have I wearied thee?” That’s what Jewish mothers say when they are disappointed with their children. As a Jewish boy, Micah probably heard his mother say that too. “O Micah, where did I go wrong, and what have I done to deserve such treatment from you?”

The next thing a Jewish mother does is to list all the things she has done and all the sacrifices she has made for the sake of her son. Jewish mothers use this tactic on their daughters too, but it doesn’t seem to work quite as well on them.

So God begins to rehearse what He has done for His people: “I brought thee up out of the land of Egypt, and redeemed thee out of the house of servants; and I sent before thee Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. O my people, remember now what Balak, king of Moab consulted, and what Balaam the son of Beor answered him.”

Like a Jewish mother, God will never let His people forget what He has done for them and how He has given them every advantage in life. I almost expected Him to conclude with that classic sarcasm, “And this is the thanks I get.”

Well, the son replies with a little sarcasm of his own. “Wherewith shall I come before the Lord and bow myself before the high God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves of a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams or with ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn

for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” In other words, “What do you want from me?”

That is the cue for the mother to say, “All I ever wanted was . . .” And then she says what it is that she wants. So God says, “He has showed thee, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God.?” Is that asking too much?

The passage goes on, beyond this little exchange, and God begins to sound more like a father. He lays out some of the specifics of His complaint and threatens His people with punishment for not doing what He wants them to do. The people are not just. They are not merciful. They are not humble. And they are not faithful. For that, they will pay.

Now I do apologize if my light hearted exposition has offended any one. The fact that I am still standing here suggest that God was not offended. I realize that not all Jewish mothers talk to their sons the way I have indicated. Certainly the mother of Jesus did not, so I especially want to apologize to her. Please forgive me Mary.

There is a great lesson here, and I don’t want it to be overshadowed by my flippancy. The lesson is that for all the laws and all the procedures and all the rubrics and all the ceremonies described in the Torah, what God really wants for His people is for them to behave in ways that reflect His own character.

Because God is just, His people should be just. Because God is merciful, His people should be merciful. And God is also humble in that He condescends to associate and communicate with us who are far below His stature and His station in the order of things. God has even condescended to live among us as one of us. As Blessed Paul says, He emptied Himself, laid aside His divine

prerogatives, and submitted to suffering, indignity and death at our hands.

The priests gave the impression that what they did in the temple was the most important thing in the life of God's people. The prophets said that was not so. The priests gave the impression that as long as people observed the holy days, and made their pilgrimages, and offered their sacrifices, and kept the kosher laws, they could pretty much live their lives any way they wanted. The prophets said that was not the case. And the Apostles agreed with the prophets.

The first Apostles were all Jews and they all observed the ritual laws of their religion. But when Gentiles began to come into the Church, the Apostles had to decide what it was about their religion that was important and what was less so. What was culturally conditioned and what was universal? Did the Gentiles have to do everything the Jews did? Or were there things that had general application and things that did not?

After much dispute, the Apostles wisely decided on the latter. They followed the prophets rather than the priests in their assessment of what was essential and what was merely helpful. That decision is reflected in our own Articles of Religion, which appear in the back of our prayer books. Article VII reads, in part, as follows:

“Although the Law given from God by Moses, as touching Ceremonies and Rites, do not bind Christian men . . . yet notwithstanding, no Christian man whatsoever is free from the obedience of the Commandments which are called moral.”

There is a story in Irish folklore about a man who attended mass every day. He was a merchant and was known for paying

low wages and charging high prices. He had his servant build a box with a hole in the top. Every day when he got home from mass he would drop a small stone through the hole into the box.

One day he decided he would open the box and count up the number of masses he had attended. But when he opened the box, he found it empty.

Well, he accused his servants of stealing the stones, which, of course was ridiculous. Who would steal a bunch of pebbles? But when he complained to the priest, the priest replied, “It is true that your body was at mass every day, but your mind was not. Your mind was thinking of how you were going to cheat somebody as soon as you got home.”

The prophet Amos was aware of such people and excoriated them. They closed their business for the holy days, all the while thinking, “When will the new moon be gone that we may sell corn, and the Sabbath that we may set forth wheat, making the ephah **[EE-fuh]** small and the shekel great, and falsifying the balances by deceit?”

The fact is that all the cultic practices of Israel, and all the rituals that we ourselves observe, are designed to accomplish two things: one is to pay God the homage that is His due; the other is to help us become like Him in the way we live. If our rituals do not do both of those things, they are worthless. They are worse than worthless because they us deceive into thinking that observing them gives us license to pursue personal pleasure and profit at the expense of others.

That’s really pretty much what Micah is saying in this passage. “He has showed thee, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?”

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St. David's Anglican Catholic Church  
Charlottesville, Virginia  
September 13, 2009

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<sup>i</sup> *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxxii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*

<sup>ii</sup> *Micah 6:1-8 (KJV).*

<sup>iii</sup> *Philippians 4:4-13 (KJV).*

<sup>iv</sup> *Micah 6:8 (KJV).*