

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER

The Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity

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

Lessons:ⁱ

First Lesson: Here beginneth the twelfth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.ⁱⁱ

“And in that day thou shalt say, O LORD, I will praise thee: though thou wast angry with me, thine anger is turned away, and thou comfortedst me. Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and not be afraid: for the LORD JEHOVAH is my strength and my song; he also is become my salvation. Therefore with joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of salvation. And in that day shall ye say, Praise the LORD, call upon his name, declare his doings among the people, make mention that his name is exalted. Sing unto the LORD; for he hath done excellent things: this is known in all the earth. Cry out and shout, thou inhabitant of Zion: for great is the Holy One of Israel in the midst of thee.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the twenty-first verse of the eleventh Chapter of the Gospel according to St. John.ⁱⁱⁱ

" . . . Then said Martha unto Jesus, Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died. But I know, that even now, whatsoever thou wilt ask of God, God will give it thee. Jesus saith [SETH] unto her, Thy brother shall rise again. Martha saith [SETH] unto him, I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day. Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Believest thou this? She saith [SETH] unto him, Yea, Lord: I believe that thou art the Christ, the Son of God, which should come into the world. And when she had so said, she went her way, and called Mary her sister secretly, saying, The Master is come, and calleth for thee. As soon as she heard that, she arose quickly, and came

unto him. Now Jesus was not yet come into the town, but was in that place where Martha met him. The Jews then which were with her in the house, and comforted her, when they saw Mary, that she rose up hastily and went out, followed her, saying, She goeth unto the grave to weep there. Then when Mary was come where Jesus was, and saw him, she fell down at his feet, saying unto him, Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died. When Jesus therefore saw her weeping, and the Jews also weeping which came with her, he groaned in the spirit, and was troubled, And said, Where have ye laid him? They said unto him, Lord, come and see. Jesus wept. Then said the Jews, Behold how he loved him! And some of them said, Could not this man, which opened the eyes of the blind, have caused that even this man should not have died? Jesus therefore again groaning in himself cometh to the grave. It was a cave, and a stone lay upon it. Jesus said, Take ye away the stone. Martha, the sister of him that was dead, saith [SETH] unto him, Lord, by this time he stinketh: for he hath been dead four days. Jesus saith [SETH] unto her, Said I not unto thee, that, if thou wouldest believe, thou shouldest see the glory of God? Then they took away the stone from the place where the dead was laid. And Jesus lifted up his eyes, and said, Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me. And I knew that thou hearest me always: but because of the people which stand by I said it, that they may believe that thou hast sent me. And when he thus had spoken, he cried with a loud voice, Lazarus, come forth. And he that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with graveclothes: and his face was bound about with a napkin. Jesus saith [SETH] unto them, Loose him, and let him go.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Homily:

The New Testament lesson for today is about a miracle. At least, that is what we call it. But that is not what the Bible calls it. The Bible calls it a sign. The difference is important because it reflects a profound difference between how ancient people and modern people approach the world.

We moderns are very curious about how things work and what makes things happen as they do. A miracle is what we call something

we don't understand. A sign is something that points to a reality beyond itself.

In a culture devoted to science and technology, the hope is to be able not only to understand but to predict, and ultimately control, everything that happens in the world. We live in such a culture. But ancient man, especially Biblical man, had no such aspirations. Ancient man understood the natural world in terms of the supernatural and was content with that. When confronted with something that was strange or unusual, his curiosity led him to ask about its meaning, not the mechanics behind it.

It is possible to be both a man of science and also a man of faith. Our greatest scientists have been both and still are. But many people deny that there is any reality beyond what our senses can perceive. Nothing exists, they think, that that we will not eventually understand and control.

We have labored for years under that presumption. Many politicians as well as many scientists have come to believe that we can or should be able to make things happen that we want to happen and prevent things from happening if we deem them undesirable.

We have made great progress in that direction; we understand how many things work. Still, we are frustrated by the fact that a handful of people can hijack an airplane and fly it into an occupied building. We remain frustrated by the violence in our streets and by the fact that natural events like an earthquake or a hurricane can paralyze an entire city while they destroy both lives and property. We invented firearms but cannot control them. We discovered nuclear energy but cannot confine it to peaceful uses.

Now we worry that cyber-terrorists could shut down our computers and make it impossible to do business, or could even take over the computers that control our traffic or our sewage treatment plants or our weapons systems and turn them against us. To paraphrase a familiar New Testament statement, he who lives by technology will die by technology.

Our artists and our philosophers and our preachers have long tried to focus on the question of meaning and have tried to help us answer it. But we have become so obsessed with Mathematics and Science that we consign such disciplines as religion and the arts to elective status, especially when it comes to allocating educational resources. Partly as a reaction and partly as a surrender to that trend, Psychologists, Sociologists, and others who work in the field of human behavior are now at pains to see themselves as scientists and reduce their research to gathering and compiling statistical data.

Even the study of government, which was once a branch of philosophy, is now called Political Science. Still we are frustrated by our inability to control human behavior much less the behavior of the wind or the oceans or the stability of the earth itself.

Hamlet says, “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.” A more spiritual age says to us, “There are more things in heaven and earth than your technology can control.”

“How does it work?” is a legitimate question and an interesting one. Finding the answer may make us more comfortable but “What does it mean?” is an essential question, and finding the answer to that question is what will make us more human and more content with life.

Now I’m sorry to drag you through all that, but I had to clear away a lot of ground before I could get to the point I want to make. And that is the point with which I started this sermon.

The raising of Lazarus is a sign: it points to a reality beyond itself. The man was clearly dead; Jesus even delayed coming on the scene in order to make sure that everybody knew he was completely dead. Then Jesus called into the darkness of the tomb and Lazarus came forth in obedience to the Lord’s command. It was the word of God that raised him from the dead. That is the point of the story.

Forget about the details of how such a thing is possible. What is important is to recognize that the Word of God is more powerful than death, and that Word, the same Word that called the world into being at

the beginning of creation, was present in the person of Jesus. That is what this event signifies.

The raising of Lazarus harks back to the beginning of creation as outlined in the opening chapter of this Gospel: “In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was with God. And the Word was God. ... All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made. ... And the word was made flesh and dwelt among us.”

Need I also point out that Easter is foreshadowed here? Or that that the same Word of God is the one thing that can raise us all from the dead? Are those things not apparent when we think of the raising of Lazarus as a sign?

Perhaps our most gifted thinkers are dealing with the wrong questions. Perhaps technology is simply a useful tool after all. Perhaps we should be thinking more about “What does it mean?” and not so much about “How does it work?” Perhaps we need to focus on the signs and not so much on the miracles.

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ⁱ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxxiv (PECUSA 1928/1943).*

ⁱⁱ *Isaiah 12:1-6 (KJV).*

ⁱⁱⁱ *St. John 11:21-44 (KJV).*