

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER

The Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity¹

The Rev. Warren E. Shaw, Rector

Lessons:

The First Lesson:² Here beginneth the twenty-fourth Chapter of the Book of Job.³

“Why, seeing times are not hidden from the Almighty, do they that know him not see his days? Some remove the landmarks; they violently take away flocks, and feed thereof. They drive away the ass of the fatherless, they take the widow’s ox for a pledge. They turn the needy out of the way: the poor of the earth hide themselves together. Behold, as wild asses in the desert, go they forth to their work; rising betimes for a prey: the wilderness yieldeth food for them and for their children. They reap every one his corn in the field: and they gather the vintage of the wicked. They cause the naked to lodge without clothing, that they have no covering in the cold. They are wet with the showers of the mountains, and embrace the rock for want of a shelter. They pluck the fatherless from the breast, and take a pledge of the poor. They cause him to go naked without clothing, and they take away the sheaf from the hungry; Which make oil within their walls, and tread their wine presses, and suffer thirst. Men groan from out of the city, and the soul of the wounded crieth out: yet God layeth not folly to them. They are of those that rebel against the light; they know not the ways thereof, nor abide in the paths thereof. The murderer rising with the light killeth the poor and needy, and in the night is as a thief. The eye also of the adulterer waiteth for the twilight, saying, No eye shall see me: and disguiseth his face. In the dark they dig through houses, which they had marked for themselves in the daytime: they know not the light. For the morning is to them even as the shadow of death: if one know them, they are in the terrors of the shadow of death.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson:⁴ Here beginneth the seventeenth Verse of the fourth Chapter of the Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Ephesians.⁵

“... This I say therefore, and testify in the Lord, that yet henceforth walk not as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind, having the understanding dark-

ened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart: who being past feeling have given themselves over unto lasciviousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness. But ye have not so learned Christ; if so be that ye have heard him, and have been taught by him, as the truth is in Jesus: that ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts; and be renewed in the spirit of your mind; and that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness. Wherefore putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbour: for we are members one of another. Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath: neither give place to the devil. Let him that stole steal no more: but rather let him labour, working with his hands the thing which is good, that he may have to give to him that needeth. Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers. And grieve not the holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption. Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice: and be ye kind one to another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Homily:

In today's Second Lesson, St. Paul is urging his gentile converts to live counter-culturally. His Jewish converts were used to living that way. The Jews have been counter-cultural from the beginning. Their dietary restrictions alone made them different from the people among whom they lived. The surrounding cultures did not practice circumcision, did not worship the same god, and certainly did not have the same moral code.

As they moved out of the Holy Land and established communities in the world dominated by Greek culture, the Jews learned how to get along with their neighbors without adopting their ways. That's not how it was for Gentile converts to Christianity. Living counter-culturally was something new to them. They were born and grew up in a pagan culture and they were used to just going along with the prevailing beliefs and practices. That has to change, says the Apostle.

Greek culture at its best was honorable, but the ordinary people, who were not well-educated or well-bred, tended to live in ways that would not have been approved by Socrates or Plato or Aristotle or Zeno. So Paul had to tell his Greek converts quite plainly that if they wanted to be Christians, they were going to have to swim against the cultural currents that were swirling around them. That's what he does in today's Epistle.

He begins by pointing out the sexual excesses and the greed that he says result from ignorance and alienation from God. They don't know any better, says the Apostle, but you do: "You did not so learn Christ." Further on in the passage, he talks about lying and anger and thievery, duplicity, and a lack of concern for the welfare of others, and he urges his converts to live differently.

"Let him that stole steal no more," he says, but rather let him work at an honorable trade so that he may have the ability to give to those who are in need. Don't carry grudges. Don't malign people. Don't gossip. Don't lie to each other. Be kind and tender hearted, instead. Speak the truth, but do it kindly. Forgive each other as God has forgiven you.

That's what St. Paul says to his Gentile converts living in a pagan culture. He might just as well be talking to us today. Most of us are not recent converts, but we are Gentile Christians living in a pagan culture. It is not a culture dominated by Greek beliefs and practices; it might be better if it were. But there are definite similarities to the worship of some of the false gods that our predecessors had to deal with in Ephesus and elsewhere.

There was Eros, the god of sexuality and lust. There was Mammon, the god of material wealth. There was Gaia, the goddess of the earth, worshipped today by environmentalist activists. And there was Technos. (Actually that's not really the name of a god. I made it up from the word for artistry and craftsmanship. The Greeks did not have computer games or guided missiles or spy cameras, or smart phones, but they loved new ideas and new inventions, just as we do.)

The worship and service of these false gods clouds the thinking and dulls the hearts of people today, just as it did when St. Paul wrote this letter. And those of us who have been taught by Christ through the Scriptures and traditions of the Church must likewise resist the trends that are swirling around us; we must live counter-culturally.

The word “love” in modern American usage has come to be understood as erotic activity. But the Greeks had other words for love as well as “eros”. St. Paul uses one of those words when he writes to the Corinthian church. He uses “agape”, which the King James version translates as “charity.” That is the word that New Testament writers use when referring to the love God has for us. It has nothing to do with erotic feelings or actions.

The Apostle, like all the New Testament writers, acknowledges that erotic love has its place. That place is within the bonds of holy matrimony, and the god Eros is to be confined to that area of life and not dominate the rest of it. The worship of Mammon is also rampant and is to be counteracted and restrained by generosity. So St. Paul talks in other letters about giving generously to a collection he is taking for the relief of the Jewish converts who are suffering in Jerusalem.

The Apostle recognizes that nature has been placed under our headship, which means that we are responsible for taking care of it. But stewardship of natural resources is not the same as the worship of Gaia. The earth is not divine. Neither is technology divine. It is useful when employed for worthy purposes, but it can also be addictive when used for mere amusement and can be destructive when used for killing people. Like Eros, Technos must be restrained and not worshipped.

Today, the false gods are all over the place, demanding our devotion and our homage. So many of our fellow Gentiles, and even some Jews, ignorantly grant it. But we have to stand apart and follow the teachings of The Bible. We cannot expect, much less compel, people whose minds have been darkened to believe or to live as we do. The prevailing culture is what it is and we cannot change it.

But we can bear witness to a better way. We can live as the Apostle urges others in a similar position to do. We can walk, not as other Gentiles walk, but as we have been taught by the holy Apostles and by Christ Himself. We can and must live counter-culturally.

“Now this I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that ye henceforth walk, not as other gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind, having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them.”
“Ye did not so learn Christ.”



St. David's Anglican Catholic Church
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¹ This sermon was originally written on the Epistle for Holy Communion on the Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity, 2013.

² *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxxvi (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

³ Job 24:1-17 (KJV).

⁴ "Upon any Sunday or Holy Day, the Minister may read the Epistle or the Gospel of the Day in place of the Second Lesson at Morning or Evening Prayer." *Concerning the Service of the Church*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER viii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

⁵ Ephesians 4:17-32 (KJV).