

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER

The Fourth Sunday in Advent¹

Lessons:

The First Lesson:² Here beginneth the fortieth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.³

“Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith [SETH] your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the LORD’s hand double for all her sins.

“The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it. The voice said, Cry. And he said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field: The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the spirit of the LORD bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever.

“O Zion, that bringest good tidings, get thee up into the high mountain; O Jerusalem, that bringest good tidings, lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid; say unto the cities of Judah, Behold your God! Behold, the Lord GOD will come with strong hand, and his arm shall rule for him: behold, his reward is with him, and his work before him. He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson:⁴ Here beginneth the nineteenth Verse of the first Chapter of the Gospel according to St. John.⁵

“This is the record of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, Who art thou? And he confessed, and denied not; but confessed, I am not the Christ. And they asked him, What then? Art thou Elias? And he saith [**SETH**], I am not. Art thou that prophet? And he answered, No. Then said they unto him, Who art thou? that we may give an answer to them that sent us. What sayest thou of thyself? He said, I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Esaias. And they which were sent were of the Pharisees. And they asked him, and said unto him, Why baptizest thou then, if thou be not that Christ, nor Elias, neither that prophet? John answered them, saying, I baptize with water: but there standeth one among you, whom ye know not; he it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe’s latchet I am not worthy to unloose. These things were done in Bethabara [**beth-ABB-uh-ruh**] beyond Jordan, where John was baptizing.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “*John answered them, saying, I baptize with water: but there standeth one among you, whom ye know not; he it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe’s latchet I am not worthy to unloose.*”⁶ In the Na~~x~~me of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Homily:

These words uttered by John presage the battles that would come soon between the old ruling class in Israel and Jesus Christ. John, the one who described himself as “*the voice of one crying in the wilderness,*”⁷ fires some of the opening salvos, pointing out just how out-of-touch and unaware the Pharisees really were.

These rulers spent most of their time studying matters related to religion, and were among the most learned people in all their society. It might, therefore, have been presumed that they, of all people, should

have known that the arrival of the Messiah was at hand, and should have expected from their readings that the Messiah would have a forerunner.

But instead of relying on what their Scripture studies should have told them, it was only once John first appeared on the scene and then began to gather a significant public following that they felt they had to send out representatives to question John. As they would later attempt with Jesus, they opened their inquiry trying to trap John into making some claim by which they could condemn him.

John, however, would have none of it, and told them plainly and directly, “*No. I am not the Christ.*” Still not satisfied, they continued, “*Are you the Prophet Elias or some other prophet returned?*” John again answered no.

We can sense their frustration with this enigmatic person as they finally asked him directly, “*Who are you? We only ask so we can give an answer to those who sent us.*” John’s answer must have left them as confused as they had been to start with: “*I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Esaias [ee-ZYE-uss].*” (Remember, the New Testament was written in Greek and the Old Testament was written in Hebrew. So here, in St. John, “Esaias” [ee-ZYE-uss] is the Greek form of the Hebrew name “Isaiah”.)

He was the voice of one man, crying out in the “wilderness” of a nation that had lost its way, lost its faith and lost its relationship with God. His voice was that of one man calling that nation back to faith and to its former devotion to God. He was that one man who was calling Israel to prepare itself for the coming of the Messiah. John, you will remember, had been baptizing people with water, calling them to repentance from their sins and a rebirth in faith.

This kind of baptism was unknown to the Pharisees, who surely jealously guarded their complete control over all matters of faith and practice. And so, because those sent to question John were followers of the Pharisees, they asked John to explain himself and his practices:

*“Why baptizest thou then, if thou be not that Christ, nor Elias, neither that prophet?”*⁸ (As with the Greek name “Esaias” [*ee-ZYE-uss*], “Elias” is the Greek form of the Hebrew name “Elijah”.) The Pharisees were, in essence, asking John, “Who gave you permission and authority to do this thing? If you are not the Messiah, nor some great prophet from the past, then how dare you introduce this new thing to the people without our consent?”

John’s answer to them was scathing: *“I baptize with water: but there standeth one among you, whom ye know not; he it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe’s latchet⁹ I am not worthy to unloose.”*¹⁰ He plainly told them that Messiah was already come, and that they were unaware of and who they did not know.

The very heads of the temple, the leaders of the Sanhedrim, the most learned religious leaders of the day were told, “God is here, but you don’t know it, and you don’t know Him.” Not only had the Messiah arrived, but He stood among them. The Pharisees had many reasons to object to this.

First, they plainly feared the loss of their power and authority in Jewish society. John was viewed by the people as a prophet, and was developing a growing following, which was alarming to the Pharisees because it was wholly independent of their authority. Also, given its charismatic nature, John’s appeal offered an alternative to the religious establishment’s claims that authority came only from the power of tradition and of hereditary descent from the Aaronic priesthood and the Levitical temple assistants.

Second, the Pharisees were convinced that they needed no repentance and certainly no forgiveness. To admit that they needed to repent would be to admit their own errors, something they could never bring themselves to do. John, however, was clear that all men, and especially the leaders of the Jews, needed to repent. Indeed, his charge, *“Make straight the way of the Lord,”* is a direct accusation against the leadership of the people that it is they who have made that way crooked.

In order to make that way straight for themselves, the people needed to repent of their sin and error and return to the practices of the covenant life with God that they had abandoned. John's baptism was with water only. He partook only in the outward sign of the sacrament, and freely admitted that he was not able to confer the second part of the sacrament, which is inward sacramental grace. He tells them however, that there was one following him, Jesus Christ, who would have that saving power.

That the Pharisees would be caught unaware of the coming of the Messiah was unthinkable to them. That the Messiah's coming could be heralded by one as plain-spoken and rough-hewn as John, rather than by some high-born and well-educated scion of the traditional religious leadership, was equally unthinkable. As a result, their minds were closed to the idea that the Christ might be at hand.

To show their disdain for the very idea, the members of the Sanhedrim could not go themselves to see this prophet, but delegated that task to messengers they sent to inquire of him and to interrogate him to see if he was a false prophet and whether he posed some danger to them. Too, they would not wish to inflame the crowds by bringing John before them, because the crowds that followed John were increasing by the day. Instead, they would want to keep him at a distance to be observed, tested, and if need be, condemned.

But just as they would fail to trap Jesus later, they also failed to trap John the Baptist. Instead, John served as the herald, the harbinger, of what was to come. He prodded, cajoled and taught the people of Israel to prepare for the coming of Jesus by making straight the way of the Lord. He called on the people to repent of sin, to reform their lives and their hearts, and to walk in the ways of the Lord, according to the covenant their forefathers had with God.

John taught that people needed to submit to baptism and to repent of their sins, and to believe in the coming Messiah, who already was walking among them. His authority to baptize came from God, John

held: the very same God whose sandals John said he was not worthy to untie.

The opening shots had been fired. The battle was joined. At the end, Jesus would be crucified, then resurrected in the victory over death, the grave and sin itself.

Now, in only two more days we celebrate the Nativity of that self-same Jesus Christ. Remember as we await His birth the conflicts that await Him, and the majesty of His victory.

Let us pray.

Dear Lord, we await now the celebration of thy birth, mindful of the struggles You faced in Your life here, and of your glorious victory over death and sin. As we face troubles in our lives, let us always remember Your example so that we may with brave face and heart face all the world can do, remaining always in thy faith and fear. This we pray in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

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¹ This sermon was originally written on the Gospel for Holy Communion on the Fourth Sunday in Advent.

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

³ Isaiah 40:1-11 (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 St. John 1:19-28 (KJV).

⁶ St. John 1:26-27 (NIV).

⁷ St. John 1:23 (NIV).

⁸ St. John 1:25 (NIV).

⁹ One of the most basic duties of a house "servant"—really, a slave—was to meet the master when he returned home and to kneel down and take off his footwear, both in order to give his feet ease and to keep him from tracking into the house the dust and dirt of the street (which was probably well-laden with, among other things, animal dung). So what John was conveying by this metaphor was (a) he was a mere servant of the Messiah's and (b) among that Messiah's servants, he, John, was one of the humblest.

¹⁰ St. John 1:26-27 (NIV).

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