

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER

The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Lessons:ⁱ

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the sixty-first Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.ⁱⁱ

“The spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound; To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all that mourn; To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he might be glorified.

“And they shall build the old wastes, they shall raise up the former desolations, and they shall repair the waste cities, the desolations of many generations. And strangers shall stand and feed your flocks, and the sons of the alien shall be your plowmen and your vinedressers. But ye shall be named the Priests of the LORD; men shall call you the Ministers of our God: ye shall eat the riches of the Gentiles, and in their glory shall ye boast yourselves.

“For your shame ye shall have double; and for confusion they shall rejoice in their portion: therefore in their land they shall possess the double: everlasting joy shall be unto them. For I the LORD love judgment, I hate robbery for burnt offering; and I will direct their work in truth, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. And their seed shall be known among the Gentiles, and their offspring among the people: all that see them shall acknowledge them, that they are the seed which the Lord hath blessed. I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for he hath clothed me with the garments of salvation, he hath covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decketh himself with ornaments, and as a bride adorneth herself with her jewels. For as the earth bringeth forth her bud, and as the garden causeth the things that are sown in it to spring forth; so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring forth before all the nations.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the sixteenth Verse of the fourth Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Luke.ⁱⁱⁱ

“And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up: and, as his custom was, he went into the synagogue on the sabbath day, and stood up for to read. And there was delivered unto him the book of the prophet Esaias^{iv} [**Ee-ZAY-uss**]. And when he had opened the book, he found the place where it was written, The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, To preach the acceptable year of the Lord. And he closed the book, and he gave it again to the minister, and sat down. And the eyes of all them that were in the synagogue were fastened on him. And he began to say unto them, This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears. And all bare him witness, and wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth. And they said, Is not this Joseph’s son? And he said unto them, Ye will surely say unto me this proverb, Physician, heal thyself: whatsoever we have heard done in Capernaum, do also here in thy country. And he said, Verily I say unto you, No prophet is accepted in his own country. But I tell you of a truth, many widows were in Israel in the days of Elias^v [**Ee-LYE-uss**], when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, when great famine was throughout all the land; But unto none of them was Elias [**Ee-LYE-uss**] sent, save unto Sarepta^{vi} [**ZAR-epp-tah**], a city of Sidon [**SYE-dunn**], unto a woman that was a widow. And many lepers were in Israel in the time of Eliseus^{vii} [**Ee-LYE-zoose**] the prophet; and none of them was cleansed, saving Naaman [**NEH-ah-mon**] the Syrian. And all they in the synagogue, when they heard these things, were filled with wrath, And rose up, and thrust him out of the city, and led him unto the brow of the hill whereon their city was built, that they might cast him down headlong. But he passing through the midst of them went his way, And came down to Capernaum [**Kah-PURR-nah-umm**], a city of Galilee, and taught them on the sabbath days. And they were astonished at his doctrine: for his word was with power.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “And there was delivered unto him the book of the prophet Esaias [ee-ZYE-uss]. And when he had opened the book, he found the place where it was written, ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord.’ And he closed the book, and he gave it again to the minister, and sat down. And the eyes of all them that were in the synagogue were fastened on him. And he began to say unto them, ‘This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears.’”^{viii}

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Homily:

Not just in the season of Advent, our specially-appointed time of introspection and preparation for our celebration of the Incarnation, but at all times throughout the Church year we should contemplate our own lives in the light of the next coming of the Messiah. As we do so, let us consider the words of the prophet Isaiah (in the Greek, Esaias [ee-ZYE-uss]) in today’s Second Lesson. As we move through that reading, listen for how Jesus again and again reminds us that the world often misunderstands what God wants of us:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord.”

The prophet says he has been chosen, elected, commanded, to teach his listeners. The Spirit of the LORD is upon me; God Himself has instructed me to speak these words to you.

And, just as High Priests of the day, and Kings, were anointed with special oils, as a sign of their divine commissioning, the prophet says he is anointed—or specially prepared and set aside for special work—to do certain tasks. These tasks are not chosen by the prophet, but by God. He then lists those tasks. And, now Jesus—in the hearing of some of the officials of the Church—was identifying Himself as one thus set aside for special tasks selected by God:

“Preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord.”

Remember that the Pharisees and Saducees despised the poor. But in His words, Jesus consistently says we are to love and help the poor—in this case, to preach the Gospel to them. The word “Gospel” is a shortened form of “God-spell”, or “God’s message”. So, far from despising and throwing aside the least fortunate of society, which the leaders of the Jews often did, Jesus is directing that we teach them the Word of God. This echoes His later words at the Sermon on the Mount: *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.”*

“He hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted,” to console the world’s afflicted, beaten down, and sorrowful. This includes the poor souls who are overwhelmed by their own sins, whom the leaders of the Old Testament church assuredly would have rejected. And, to further challenge their world view, Jesus notes that it is **He** who is sent, not the heads of that old Church which, although those leaders do not yet know it, is in the process of passing away at the same time as—and actually because—Jesus is speaking to His own followers.

“To preach deliverance to the captives....” To Christ’s hearers, this must have seemed an obvious reference to the Hebrews’ release from captivity in Egypt but as they would realize through the course of His ministry, it uses that image from the Jew’s national history to signify much more than that. In the New Testament version of the Covenant, the captives are to be delivered from sin, from suffering under an oppressive system, from evil. When the heart is free to love and worship

God, the imprisoned state of the body matters little. As Saul of Tarsus, the quintessential Pharisee, was about to learn, the chains of slavery to the Pharisaical legal system are being challenged.

“[A]nd recovering of sight to the blind”. Not only did our LORD in several instances literally recover the sight of the blind, He opens the eyes of the people to the possibilities of the Kingdom of Heaven.

“To set at liberty them that are bruised”: to grant freedom of spirit to those oppressed and bruised by the reality of sin. Remember how vehement was the Pharisees’ reaction to Jesus’ claim to forgive sins. Yet here He was in the temple—the very center of the Jewish religious system—saying He was sent by the Father to do this very thing. Offensive as His words were, for the traditional Jews interpreted them as blasphemy, how much more offensive was His choice of the place in which to utter them!

“To preach the acceptable year of the Lord”: to teach those who had long been told that they were beyond saving, to say instead God that would now receive and forgive sinners who come to Him with contrite hearts. This message of restoration was completely new, a revolutionary idea to Jesus’ listeners. Under the Old Covenant, there was no mechanism by which God forgave sinners, even repentant ones. While offerings were made for sin, that was a one-sided gesture, for there was no response made to those offerings. Devout Jews were constantly acknowledging their shortcomings before God but were doing so without any hope of relief from their persistent state of sinfulness.

And once He had spoken these revolutionary and challenging words, our LORD sat down and waited—and the Scripture says, “all the eyes of them that were in the synagogue were fastened upon him.” The people were waiting for what else this amazing Teacher might tell them. This Man, who spoke with such power, and clarity and truth—who untangled the Gordian knot of Pharisaical laws—what else might He reveal?

Can you imagine yourself with them? This Man, the son of a carpenter, teaching with such power—and teaching that much of what they had been told by the leaders of the Church was in error. This Man who, when challenged, always had an answer that could not be assailed.

His next statement was surely the most difficult for them to understand and accept: “*This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears.*” This day, not someday in the future. Not “wait till next year.” This day is this Scripture—this section of prophecy—fulfilled, coming to pass, and accomplished.

“*In your ears*”: within your earshot. Not in some foreign place, or mystical land. Not in a book, or a story you are told by a minstrel. Right here, in this place: in your lives and experience.

“*This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears.*” An incredible claim.

Now, to be sure, not everyone believed Jesus’ words. Some were angered by them and some immediately saw Jesus as a threat to their place in society. After all, if this seemingly common man—a mere carpenter—could claim to be the Messiah, then what need would there be for official intermediaries? What use for the leaders of the Church who had for so long told everyone to depend on them?

Conclusion:

Part of the Christian life is a continual re-examination of what we believe. Advent and Lent merely offer us the reminder, in the form of a devotional requirement, of that general injunction to consider our relationship with God and our fellow man. In that re-examination and re-evaluation, we are often called upon to make difficult adjustments to our beliefs and behaviors.

My wish for you today is that we each find in our hearts the faith, the courage, and the wisdom to examine our lives and our relationships, and to make all such changes as we need to make to prepare ourselves for the coming of the LORD and for the limitless possibilities of forgiveness that He brought to us.

Let us pray:

O LORD, give us each this day the grace live your word in the world, to take our place alongside your Saints preparing the way of the Lord, and preparing His people for his coming again. Amen.

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

ⁱⁱ *Isaiah 61:1-11 (KJV).*

ⁱⁱⁱ *St. Luke 4:16-32 (KJV).*

^{iv} *Isaiah (RSV).*

^v *Elijah (RSV).*

^{vi} *Zarephath (RSV).*

^{vii} *Elisha (RSV).*

^{viii} *St. Luke 4:17-21 (KJV).*

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