

SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYERⁱ

The Tenth Sunday after Trinityⁱⁱ

Lessons:ⁱⁱⁱ

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the first Chapter of the Lamentations of Jeremiah.^{iv}

“How doth the city sit solitary, that was full of people! how is she become as a widow! she that was great among the nations, and princess among the provinces, how is she become tributary! She weepeth sore in the night, and her tears are on her cheeks: among all her lovers she hath none to comfort her: all her friends have dealt treacherously with her, they are become her enemies. Judah is gone into captivity because of affliction, and because of great servitude: she dwelleth among the heathen, she findeth no rest: all her persecutors overtook her between the straits. The ways of Zion do mourn, because none come to the solemn feasts: all her gates are desolate: her priests sigh, her virgins are afflicted, and she is in bitterness. Her adversaries are the chief, her enemies prosper; for the LORD hath afflicted her for the multitude of her transgressions: her children are gone into captivity before the enemy. And from the daughter of Zion all her beauty is departed: her princes are become like harts that find no pasture, and they are gone without strength before the pursuer. Jerusalem remembered in the days of her affliction and of her miseries all her pleasant things that she had in the days of old, when her people fell into the hand of the enemy, and none did help her: the adversaries saw her, and did mock at her sabbaths. Jerusalem hath grievously sinned; therefore she is removed: all that honoured her despise her, because they have seen her nakedness: yea, she sigheth, and turneth backward. Her filthiness is in her skirts; she remembereth not her last end; therefore she came down wonderfully: she had no comforter. O Lord, behold my affliction: for the enemy hath magnified himself. The adversary hath spread out his hand upon all her pleasant things: for she hath seen that the heathen entered into her sanctuary, whom thou didst command that they should not enter into thy congregation. All her people sigh, they seek bread; they have given their pleasant things for meat to relieve the soul: see, O LORD, and consider; for I am become vile.

“Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by? behold, and see if there be any sorrow like unto my sorrow, which is done unto me, wherewith the LORD hath afflicted me in the day of his fierce anger.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the forty-first Verse of the nineteenth Chapter of the Gospel according to St. Luke.^v

“And when he was come near, he beheld the city, and wept over it, Saying, If thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things which belong unto thy peace! but now they are hid from thine eyes. For the days shall come upon thee, that thine enemies shall cast a trench about thee, and compass thee round, and keep thee in on every side, And shall lay thee even with the ground, and thy children within thee; and they shall not leave in thee one stone upon another; because thou knewest not the time of thy visitation. And he went into the temple, and began to cast out them that sold therein, and them that bought; Saying unto them, It is written, My house is the house of prayer: but ye have made it a den of thieves. And he taught daily in the temple. But the chief priests and the scribes and the chief of the people sought to destroy him, And could not find what they might do: for all the people were very attentive to hear him.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “And he entered the temple and began to drive out those who sold, saying to them, ‘It is written, “My house shall be a house of prayer”; but you have made it a den of robbers.’ And he was teaching daily in the temple. The chief priests and the scribes and the principal men of the people sought to destroy him....”^{vi} In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Homily:

There is perhaps no greater evil than attempting to put human avarice in the way of people’s attempting to worship God.

In today's Gospel, we read of the time that our Lord was driven to the expression of righteous anger as He entered the Temple in Jerusalem and beheld vendors and money changers plying their trade at the entrance courtyard to the Temple.

Following Old Testament rules, Jews were to bring tribute to the Temple in the form of animals – primarily doves, sheep or oxen for burnt offerings. These animals or birds had to be perfect, without any form of blemish, or they would be unworthy of being offered to God. If the worshippers had no animal to offer, perhaps due to the hardships of their travel to the Temple, then once there they could purchase doves or other animals. Thus a lively market grew up in the outer courtyard of the Temple—a very profitable market for the sellers because these particular buyers had no ready alternative other than to accept whatever was available and to pay whatever was demanded.

Similarly, money offerings at the temple had to be made in a special coinage that bore only Jewish religious motifs; the coins minted by pagan rulers could not be used because these bore either the faces of those rulers, who were accounted as gods, or, like the coins of ancient Athens, bore the images of their issuing governments' patron gods or goddesses. But if these devout Jews came from a foreign land—where a religiously unacceptable currency was used—that was no matter. There were “money-changers” in the Temple courtyard, right alongside the sellers of sacrificial animals, who for a fee would change the foreign coin into local currency so that the travelers could buy what they needed, or pay their Temple taxes.

All of these things were done at a price. Thus, those who came to follow the requirements of religious tribute were forced to pay the profits to the merchants as well as the costs of their own travel to the Temple. So people's worship was controlled by the greed of other people, more fortunately situated people, for personal profits at the worshippers' expense.

This incident was so important that it is one of the few that is reported in each of the three Synoptic Gospels^{vii} as well as by St. John,

even though each Gospel gives at most four verses to its account. Here is St. John's version:

“The Passover of the Jews was at hand, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers at their business. And making a whip of cords, he drove them all, with the sheep and oxen, out of the temple; and he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables. And he told those who sold the pigeons, ‘Take these things away; you shall not make my Father’s house a house of trade.’”^{viii}

So now Our Lord entered the Temple, only to find the money changers and sellers of animals in place. His reaction was precisely what it should have been from a pious believer.

He first proclaimed where the authority to make changes comes from. He drew His authority from the very Scriptures that the Pharisees were supposed to be defending: *“It is written, my house shall be a house of prayer.”*

The Temple is God's house, and so it is clear in whose behalf our Lord was speaking. Left unsaid, but clear, was that the Pharisees themselves were duplicitous in allowing this desecration of the Temple to occur. He threw the merchants out of the Temple and even forbade them from carrying their items anywhere in the Temple.

The Pharisees were outraged at this interference and at being blamed directly for allowing the practice to occur. They immediately grew even firmer in their resolve to destroy Jesus.

It is more than likely that some of the merchants were overcharging for their wares, and almost certainly demanding unreasonably high commissions for changing money—as witnesses for this, we have not only Our Lord's particular choice of words, including “thieves”, but our own knowledge of human nature. Someone would always have been found who was willing and able to take advantage of the religious needs and logistical disadvantages of the pilgrims from far

places. But even if they were not, they still should not have been conducting that business on Temple grounds.

Doing so was disrespectful to God and man and drew the furious reaction from our Lord. Jesus justified His reaction by quoting Scripture. God's temple should be a house of prayer, and was instead being turned into a den of thieves. The Temple was to be a place of worship and service, not a place for making financial gain.

Remember, too, that our Lord was making His final entry to Jerusalem, where He would be rejected by the very people He had come to save. He knew, all too well, what His end was to be and at whose hands. Thus He felt it necessary to draw with absolute clarity the differences between how He regarded the Temple and how the rulers of Israel did so.

As He approached the city, He wept for it. He knew what was to happen there, and yet He wept not for Himself, but for the city and her people who were about to enter into their greatest disgrace and loss. This, the greatest city in the Holy Land, was to face such calamity because it would not learn and change, even when the truth was preached in the very midst of the city.

Much as a loving parent cries to see a child in pain from making bad decisions, yet knows He cannot interfere in those decisions, so Jesus wept over the city now. He did not divert the blame for the coming catastrophe, but wept that it must be so.

After weeping, our Lord entered the city and went straight to the Temple—His Temple. There, he first threw out those who profaned the Temple and disgraced it, then went forward to do what should be done. He preached the Gospel in the Temple. Even though the end was coming, and would not be changed, our Lord continued to teach those who would listen and learn.

And the people, while they would not or could not change their ways and turn from the evil that condemned them, listened to Him. They were attentive to the words of Jesus, so attentive and protective,

that the Gospels tell us that the Pharisees dared not move against Him while He was with the crowd or in the Temple.

From the time of His childhood until just before His end, our Lord was to be found teaching, guiding, loving people. Until right at His end—when the lies and deceit of the Pharisees blinded them into becoming a raging mob—these people remained with Him.

It is said that there are none so blind as they who will not see, and none so deaf as they who will not hear. Yet our Lord, rather than abandoning them to their folly, rather than turning away and leaving them, stayed the course. He wept for them, lost souls, because He preferred that they turn and live rather than going on to their death.

History tells us that Jerusalem did not escape the day of desolation. Less than forty years after these events, Jerusalem was laid waste with a fury seldom seen in warfare. The Roman general Titus dug a trench around the city, raised a wall all the way around the city to prevent escape, then proceeded to level the city and massacre its inhabitants.

There was, we are told, “scarcely one stone left upon another.” A warning indeed, that stands for all time. Just as Jerusalem was destroyed, so can anyone who tries to prevent others from finding God be. There is no greater evil, and no greater punishment.

Let us pray:

Dear Lord, let us always be mindful of our words and actions, that we never put ourselves, our words or our pride in the way of others who seek You. Let us rather always guide others to You, serving as the beckoning light of Your call to the world, and the examples of Your people. Give us the courage to always keep your temple Holy and pure, even in a world so filled with distraction, avarice and evil. This we pray of Your mercy. Amen.

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The Rev. Mr. Larry Wagoner, MSW^{ix}
August 12, 2012

ⁱ “Any set of Psalms and Lessons appointed for the evening of any day may be read at the morning service, and any set of morning Psalms and Lessons may be read in the evening.” Concerning the Service of the Church, *THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER* viii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

ⁱⁱ This sermon was originally written for the Gospel at Holy Communion on the Tenth Sunday after Trinity, 2012.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), *The Book of Common Prayer* xxxi (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

^{iv} *Lamentations 1:1-12* (KJV).

^v *St. Luke 19:41-end* (KJV).

^{vi} *St. Luke 19:45-47* (RSV).

^{vii} *St. Matthew 21:12-13; St. Mark 11:15-19.*

^{viii} *St. John 2:13-16* (RSV).

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