

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER

The First Sunday in Advent

Lessons:¹

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

“The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz [EH-moss], which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah [uzz-EYE-uh], Jotham [DGAH-thamm], Ahaz [EH-hazz], and Hezekiah [hezz-ek-EYE-uh], kings of Judah. Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth: for the LORD hath spoken, I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against me. The ox knoweth his owner, and the ass his master’s crib: but Israel doth not know, my people doth not consider. Ah sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evildoers, children that are corrupters: they have forsaken the LORD, they have provoked the Holy One of Israel unto anger, they are gone away backward.

“Why should ye be stricken any more? ye will revolt more and more: the whole head is sick, and the whole heart faint. From the sole of the foot even unto the head there is no soundness in it; but wounds, and bruises, and putrifying sores: they have not been closed, neither bound up, neither mollified with ointment. Your country is desolate, your cities are burned with fire: your land, strangers devour it in your presence, and it is desolate, as overthrown by strangers. And the daughter of Zion is left as a cottage in a vineyard, as a lodge in a garden of cucumbers, as a besieged city. Except the LORD of hosts had left unto us a very small remnant, we should have been as Sodom, and we should have been like unto Gomorrah.

“Hear the word of the LORD, ye rulers of Sodom; give ear unto the law of our God, ye people of Gomorrah. To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me? saith the LORD: I am full of the burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts; and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he goats. When ye come to appear

before me, who hath required this at your hand, to tread my courts? Bring no more vain oblations; incense is an abomination unto me; the new moons and sabbaths, the calling of assemblies, I cannot away with; it is iniquity, even the solemn meeting. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth: they are a trouble unto me; I am weary to bear them. And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you: yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood.

“Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow. Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool. If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land: But if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the thirteenth Verse of the fourth Chapter of the first Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Thessalonians.³

“... But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall

we ever be with the Lord. Wherefore comfort one another with these words.

“But of the times and the seasons, brethren, ye have no need that I write unto you. For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night. For when they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape. But ye, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief. Ye are all the children of light, and the children of the day: we are not of the night, nor of darkness. Therefore let us not sleep, as do others; but let us watch and be sober. For they that sleep sleep in the night; and they that be drunken are drunken in the night. But let us, who are of the day, be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love; and for an helmet, the hope of salvation. For God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ, Who died for us, that, whether we wake or sleep, we should live together with him. Wherefore comfort yourselves together, and edify one another, even as also ye do.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “But of the times and the seasons, brethren, ye have no need that I write unto you. For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so cometh as a thief in the night.”⁴ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Introduction:

The world outside the Faith tends to lump all Christians together, such as by assuming that all of us, regardless of our particular confessional histories, believe the same things. At least, many do so, although some of our more sophisticated friends recognize that true Christians may share

only certain central beliefs and may differ among ourselves on other, more peripheral matters.

This is, in a way, a natural set of assumptions for outsiders to make; after all, is it not what we ourselves do with other large, and to us undifferentiated, religious traditions, such as Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism? Yet each of those larger faith groups contains within it a number of highly varied traditions, families, and sects, to the members of which, their differences from their supposed fellow-religionists are often more important than are their differences from, say, outsiders such as us.

Theme:

As outsiders and non-specialists in comparative religions, most of us are not qualified to opine on the distinctions between, for example, Sunni, Shiite, Ismaili, Sufi, and other subdivisions of Islam; does anyone in this congregation have the slightest idea what a “Twelver” is, or who “the last Imam” was? So we should not be at all surprised when outsiders to our Faith are unaware of the distinctions between us and some of our brethren, important as we ourselves find those distinctions to be.

Development:

And some of those distinctions are, in fact, important, that is, in the terms we used a short time ago, they are central, or essential matters, about which we need to be well informed and which we need to understand in considerable detail. Among these central ideas are, for example, those of the Trinity, of the Virgin Birth, of Christ’s one all-atoning Sacrifice, of the Forgiveness of Sins, of the Resurrection of the Dead, and of the Life of the world to come.

If those last few phrases sound familiar, yes, they are, and yes, they are from the Creeds. For most of the truly es-

late the date of, time of, place of, or order of events for, Our Lord's next coming among us. It would not be of the slightest use to us to know these things, even if we could know them, but, sadly, we are assured in the clearest terms in Scripture that we cannot know them at all: "[Y]e know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh"¹⁵ and "the Son of man cometh at an hour when ye think not."¹⁶

So anyone who tries to distract you from your true Christian task by waving before your eyes such pointless ponderings most certainly does not have your spiritual welfare at heart.

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¹ *An Alternative Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised in 1928)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER, WITH THE ADDITIONS AND DEVIATIONS PROPOSED IN 1928 30 (Canterbury Press 2008); *The Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised In 1928)*, A BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxi (South Africa 1954); *A Table of Lessons (authorized by the Episcopal Synod)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xix (CIPBC 1963).

² Isaiah 1:1-20 (KJV).

³ I Thessalonians 4:13—5:11 (KJV).

⁴ I Thessalonians 5:1-2 (KJV).

⁵ I Thessalonians 5:4-5 (KJV).

⁶ Philippians 2:12 (KJV).

⁷ St. Matthew 24:42 (KJV).

⁸ St. Mark 13:33 (KJV).

⁹ St. Mark 13:35 (KJV).

¹⁰ St. Matthew 25:1-13.

¹¹ St. Matthew 25:13 (KJV).

¹² St. Luke 12:35-38.

¹³ St. Luke 12:39.

¹⁴ St. Luke 12:40.

¹⁵ St. Matthew 25:13 (KJV).

¹⁶ St. Luke 12:40.

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sentinal ideas in Christianity are to be found set out in that set of three lapidary historic statements of the Faith, the Nicene, the Apostles', and the Athanasian Creeds. And just about anything else, that is not found in, or readily derived from, one of those Creeds can safely be written off as one of those peripheral matters on which Christians may differ without thereby compromising their Christian credentials.

But between those two categories – the essentials of the Faith and the nonessentials – there is a third, somewhat troubling category. This consists of those things which are, in traditional eyes, nonessential, but which are, in the estimation of others, essential and which are, therefore, taught and upheld as essential. But this is a true case of "majoring in minors".

These often stimulating and intricate notions offer the lure of limited, inside knowledge, but that lure is merely a special application of one of the Seven Deadly Sins, that of Pride. As St. Paul told the Thessalonians: "Ye are all the children of light, and the children of the day: we are not of the night, nor of darkness."⁵ In other words, in Christianity, unlike, say, Theosophism [*thee-oh-SOAFF-izm*], there are no hidden secrets, there is no special, inside information that is available only to a favored cadre or elite.

In our own time, among these nonessentials that masquerade as essentials, there is the concept of "Millennialism" [*mill-ENN-ee-ah-izm*] that is one of the principal among these nonessentials. "Millennialism" comes from a Latin root that refers to a period of a thousand years and some traditional theologians use a similar Greek root to call these beliefs "Chiliasm" [*CHILL-ee-az-um*].

Two or three versions of this "Millennialism" are held some of our brethren, and in particular some of our Protestant brethren who style themselves as "Evangelicals", and, by them are promoted as essential beliefs for authentic Chris-

tians. You may have heard the names of some of these versions, such as “Premillennialism”, “Postmillennialism”, and “Amillennialism”. All of them are based on variant interpretations of the Book of Revelations, Chapter 20, Verses 1-6.

Of course, given the verbal and semiotic obscurantism of the Book of Revelation, the Church, which is the custodian and interpreter of Scripture, has never been comfortable with any effort to derive more from that Book more than some very poetic images of heaven and of the court of God who reigns there. Revelation has never been seen as a suitable source of Christian doctrine, which makes more than suspect any attempt to construct a travel agent’s itinerary for Our Lord’s Second Coming.

But quite apart from this problem which relates to the source from which Millennialists derive their characteristic theories, there are two further difficulties, either one of which should be more than sufficient to give the serious Christian pause before he or she is willing to lend credence to these ideas. So if the first problem with Millennialism arises out of the difficulties in deriving any meaningful interpretations from the Book of Revelation, the second arises out of the utility of any such interpretations even if they could reliably be made.

To put this in the form of a question: “Even if we could work out where Christ would come at the end of time, and how He would occupy Himself once He came there, of what possible help would that knowledge be to us in our struggle to live the Christian life or, as St. Paul put it to the Philippians,⁶ ‘to work out our salvation in fear and trembling’?”

There is, of course, only one rational answer to that question: “There is absolutely nothing that knowledge of Christ’s time and place of coming could possibly do to assist us along our Christian journey toward perfection, any more

than knowing the date of the original Creation could assist us along that same journey.”

The third problem with trying to serve as Christ’s travel agent involves Scripture itself. These efforts are based in personal interpretations of Revelations 20:1-6, and these efforts presumably imply that their authors acknowledge the authority of Scripture. But Scripture itself tells us that we are not to know, and are not to seek to know, precisely when or where Our Lord will come. As St. Matthew tells us: “Watch therefore: for ye know not what hour your Lord doth come.”⁷

St. Mark repeats this injunction: “Take ye heed, watch and pray: for ye know not when the time is.”⁸ In fact, St. Mark reinforces it by a second image: “Watch ye therefore: for ye know not when the master of the house cometh, at even, or at midnight, or at the cockcrowing, or in the morning....”⁹

Our Lord repeated this same teaching in His parable of the five wise and five foolish virgins,¹⁰ which ends with the clear and express direction, “Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh.”¹¹

The same lesson is repeated yet again in another parable, that of the servants who keep watch for their master’s return,¹² and in a related image, that of the householder who did not know when the housebreakers would come.¹³ These are summarized in another short, pithy verse: “Be ye therefore ready also: for the Son of man cometh at an hour when ye think not.”¹⁴

Conclusion:

I urge you, therefore, do not indulge yourselves in seductive theological speculations such as attempts to calcu-