

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER¹
The Fourth Sunday after Trinity

Lessons:²

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the twelfth Chapter of the First Book of Samuel.³

“And Samuel said unto all Israel, Behold, I have hearkened unto your voice in all that ye said unto me, and have made a king over you. And now, behold, the king walketh before you: and I am old and grayheaded; and, behold, my sons are with you: and I have walked before you from my childhood unto this day. Behold, here I am: witness against me before the LORD, and before his anointed: whose ox have I taken? or whose ass have I taken? or whom have I defrauded? whom have I oppressed? or of whose hand have I received any bribe to blind mine eyes therewith? and I will restore it you. And they said, Thou hast not defrauded us, nor oppressed us, neither hast thou taken ought of any man’s hand. And he said unto them, The LORD is witness against you, and his anointed is witness this day, that ye have not found ought in my hand. And they answered, He is witness.

“And Samuel said unto the people, It is the LORD that advanced Moses and Aaron, and that brought your fathers up out of the land of Egypt. Now therefore stand still, that I may reason with you before the LORD of all the righteous acts of the LORD, which he did to you and to your fathers. When Jacob was come into Egypt, and your fathers cried unto the LORD, then the LORD sent Moses and Aaron, which brought forth your fathers out of Egypt, and made them dwell in this place. And when they forgot the LORD their God, he sold them into the hand of Sisera [**SISS-urr-uh**], captain of the host of Hazor [**HAY-zoar**], and into the hand of the Philistines, and into the hand of the king of Moab, and they fought against them. And they cried unto the LORD, and said, We have sinned, because we have forsaken the LORD, and have served Baalim [**BAY-uh-limb**] and Ashtaroth [**ASH-tuh-rahth**]: but now deliver us out of the hand of our

enemies, and we will serve thee. And the LORD sent Jerubbaal [**dgerr-uh-BAY-ull**], and Bedan [**BEE-dann**], and Jephthah [**JEFF-thuh**], and Samuel, and delivered you out of the hand of your enemies on every side, and ye dwelled safe. And when ye saw that Nahash [**NAY-hash**] the king of the children of Ammon came against you, ye said unto me, Nay; but a king shall reign over us: when the LORD your God was your king. Now therefore behold the king whom ye have chosen, and whom ye have desired! and, behold, the LORD hath set a king over you. If ye will fear the LORD, and serve him, and obey his voice, and not rebel against the commandment of the LORD, then shall both ye and also the king that reigneth over you continue following the LORD your God: But if ye will not obey the voice of the LORD, but rebel against the commandment of the LORD, then shall the hand of the LORD be against you, as it was against your fathers.

“Now therefore stand and see this great thing, which the LORD will do before your eyes. Is it not wheat harvest to day? I will call unto the LORD, and he shall send thunder and rain; that ye may perceive and see that your wickedness is great, which ye have done in the sight of the LORD, in asking you a king. So Samuel called unto the LORD; and the LORD sent thunder and rain that day: and all the people greatly feared the LORD and Samuel. And all the people said unto Samuel, Pray for thy servants unto the LORD thy God, that we die not: for we have added unto all our sins this evil, to ask us a king.

“And Samuel said unto the people, Fear not: ye have done all this wickedness: yet turn not aside from following the LORD, but serve the LORD with all your heart; And turn ye not aside: for then should ye go after vain things, which cannot profit nor deliver; for they are vain. For the LORD will not forsake his people for his great name’s sake: because it hath pleased the LORD to make you his people. Moreover as for me, God forbid that I should sin against the LORD in ceasing to pray for you: but I will teach you the good and the right way: Only fear the LORD, and serve him

in truth with all your heart: for consider how great things he hath done for you. But if ye shall still do wickedly, ye shall be consumed, both ye and your king.”

Or,

Here beginneth the thirty-ninth Chapter of the Book of Job.⁴

“Knowest thou the time when the wild goats of the rock bring forth? or canst thou mark when the hinds do calve? Canst thou number the months that they fulfil? or knowest thou the time when they bring forth? They bow themselves, they bring forth their young ones, they cast out their sorrows. Their young ones are in good liking, they grow up with corn; they go forth, and return not unto them. Who hath sent out the wild ass free? or who hath loosed the bands of the wild ass? Whose house I have made the wilderness, and the barren land his dwellings. He scorneth the multitude of the city, neither regardeth he the crying of the driver. The range of the mountains is his pasture, and he searcheth after every green thing. Will the unicorn be willing to serve thee, or abide by thy crib? Canst thou bind the unicorn with his band in the furrow? or will he harrow the valleys after thee? Wilt thou trust him, because his strength is great? or wilt thou leave thy labour to him? Wilt thou believe him, that he will bring home thy seed, and gather it into thy barn? Gavest thou the goodly wings unto the peacocks? or wings and feathers unto the ostrich? Which leaveth her eggs in the earth, and warmeth them in dust, And forgetteth that the foot may crush them, or that the wild beast may break them. She is hardened against her young ones, as though they were not her's: her labour is in vain without fear; Because God hath deprived her of wisdom, neither hath he imparted to her understanding. What time she lifteth up herself on high, she scorneth the horse and his rider. Hast thou given the horse strength? hast thou clothed his neck with thunder? Canst thou make him afraid as a grasshopper?

the glory of his nostrils is terrible. He paweth in the valley, and rejoiceth in his strength: he goeth on to meet the armed men. He mocketh at fear, and is not affrighted; neither turneth he back from the sword. The quiver rattleth against him, the glittering spear and the shield. He swalloweth the ground with fierceness and rage: neither believeth he that it is the sound of the trumpet. He saith [SETH] among the trumpets, Ha, ha; and he smelleth the battle afar off, the thunder of the captains, and the shouting. Doth the hawk fly by thy wisdom, and stretch her wings toward the south? Doth the eagle mount up at thy command, and make her nest on high? She dwelleth and abideth on the rock, upon the crag of the rock, and the strong place. From thence she seeketh the prey, and her eyes behold afar off. Her young ones also suck up blood: and where the slain are, there is she.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the twelfth Chapter of the Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Romans.⁵

“I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God. For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith. For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office: So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith; Or ministry, let us wait on our ministering: or he that teacheth, on teaching; Or he

for by so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”¹²

And now, unto God ✠ the Father, God ✠ the Son, and God ✠ the Holy Ghost, be ascribed, as is most justly due, all might, majesty, dominion, power, and glory, both now and evermore. Amen.

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The Rev’d Canon John A. Hollister JD¹³
July 1, 2012

¹ This was originally written as a sermon for Mass on the Third Sunday after the Epiphany, 2011.

² *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 39 (Canterbury Press 2008); *The Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised In 1928)*, A BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxxiii (South Africa 1954); *A Table of Lessons (authorized by the Episcopal Synod)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxxi (CIPBC 1963).

³ I Samuel 12:1-end (KJV).

⁴ Job 39:1-end (KJV).

⁵ Romans 12:1-end (KJV).

⁶ Romans 12:19 (RSV), quoting Deuteronomy 32:35.

⁷ Article IX, *Of Original or Birth-Sin*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 604 (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

⁸ See, e.g., PLATO, THE REPUBLIC 427e and 435b; MARCUS TULLIUS CICERO, DE INVENTIONE, II, LIII. The term “cardinal” comes from the Latin *cardo*, or hinge, for the moral life hangs on these virtues in the same way a door hangs on its hinges. To these “cardinal”, “pagan”, or “natural” virtues, Christianity has traditionally added three uniquely “Christian” or “theological” virtues: faith, hope, and charity (or love).

⁹ Genesis 1:26-30.

¹⁰ 1597-1633.

¹¹ Proverbs 25:21-22.

¹² Romans 12:20-21 (RSV).

¹³ Priest Associate, Christ Anglican Catholic Church, Metairie LA; Priest-in-Charge, Holy Angels Anglican Catholic Mission, Picayune MS; Honorary Canon, the Diocese of the Resurrection, and Honorary Canon

sons who are known to have, or who are reasonably believed to have, violent propensities.

The difference between taking vengeance, on the one hand, and being the victim – even the self-defending victim – of a criminal, on the other hand, is simple. When we set out to take vengeance on others, we either hunt them down – whether literally or metaphorically – in their usual habitats or we lure them into our usual habitat so we can ambush them.

That is, we are deliberately moving into those others' spaces in order that we may do them harm, so our actions leading up to that confrontation are active ones.

In contrast, when we defending ourselves against another's attack, that attacker has moved into our space, in order that he or she may do us harm. Thus our actions leading up to that confrontation are purely passive ones. The prohibition on taking vengeance forbids us to become vigilantes; it does not command us to become helpless patsies.

Conclusion:

Finally, there are emotional benefits to us if we follow God's injunction about vengeance – even if, perhaps, the emotions involved are not the most worthy ones. There was an English clergyman who was also a famous poet, whose cure had a name so *outré* that it sounds like a caricature taken from some particularly light-hearted novel. And what was written by the Vicar of Fugglestone St. Peter with Bremerston St. Andrew—better known to most as the poet George Herbert¹⁰—that bears on today's topic was, “Living well is the best revenge.”

Or, as St. Paul told the Romans in today's Epistle, quoting one of the ancient Hebrew Proverbs:¹¹ “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink;

that exhorteth, on exhortation: he that giveth, let him do it with simplicity; he that ruleth, with diligence; he that she-weth mercy, with cheerfulness. Let love be without dissimulation. Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good. Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another; Not slothful in business; fervent in spirit; serving the Lord; Rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation; continuing instant in prayer; Distributing to the necessity of saints; given to hospitality. Bless them which persecute you: bless, and curse not. Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep. Be of the same mind one toward another. Mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate. Be not wise in your own conceits. Recompense to no man evil for evil. Provide things honest in the sight of all men. If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men. Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith [SETH] the Lord. Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.□’”⁶ In the Name of the ✠ Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the ✠ Holy Ghost. Amen.

Introduction, Theme, and Development:

Being humans, and especially being humans who are inescapably afflicted with what theologians call “original sin”, that is, with natures that seek to act contrary to God's

will for us, we are constantly tempted to avenge the wrongs others have done to us – or, at least, the wrongs we imagine others have done to us.

To understand how it is that we are so beset by these adverse impulses, we have only to look at the Articles of Religion, where the ninth Article teaches us:

“Original sin ... is the fault and corruption of the Nature of every man, that naturally is engendered in the offspring of Adam; whereby man is very far gone from original righteousness, and is of his own nature inclined to evil, so that the flesh lusteth always contrary to the Spirit; and therefore in every person born into this world, it deserveth God’s wrath and condemnation.”⁷

Thus, as with all the other things that lead us into sin, and regardless of the fact that that God has commanded us not to take vengeance on others, our natural instincts thrust us toward that self-indulgence in revenge. However, even the ancient pagans, who had no concept of sin, let alone of original sin, recognized that one of the prime functions of morality is to teach us to reign in our instincts and impulses.

That is why the Greek and Roman philosophers placed so much emphasis on the cultivation of the virtues, the qualities that act as counterpoises to our innate vices. In their classic formulation, these much-desired virtues were summarized in the four Cardinal Virtues: Temperance, Prudence, Justice, and Fortitude.⁸ It does not take a great deal of thought to recognize how each of those Cardinal Virtues acts as a restraint upon our natural impulses respectively to excess, to impulsiveness, to selfishness, and to laziness or cowardice.

Now these overpowering natural instincts to do harm arise in all areas of our lives but they are particularly strong

when they are urging us to lash out at those who we see as having wronged us. In part this is because of a desire to redress the balance between us and them. In part, it is the product of anger, the sort of anger into which fear quickly changes. And fear is usually our first reaction when something harms us, because that harm forces us to confront our own vulnerability.

It is not an especially Christian observation that vengeance belongs to the Lord, not to us; after all, this was first revealed to the ancient Hebrews in the Book of Proverbs, long before the advent of Christianity. It is, however, a revelation that was made uniquely to those Hebrews, out of all the other ancient peoples, so it is firmly fixed within the Judeo-Christian tradition. And if we truly believe in a just God, then we must be satisfied to leave to that God the rendering of punishment for the transgressions that others may commit against us.

Notice, however, that we have here been considering the matter of taking revenge. There is nothing unChristian, nothing contrary to God’s law, in our taking reasonable and prudent steps to protect ourselves from harms that might beset us, even when those harms would be inflicted by others who have already hurt us or those we love. Prudence, after all, is one of those four Cardinal Virtues about which we spoke earlier. Also, in the Scriptural account of the Creation there is a clear implication that we are to exercise wise stewardship over all with which God has entrusted us,⁹ and such stewardship certainly includes avoiding reasonably foreseeable causes of damage.

So, for example, there is nothing vengeful about refusing to hire a known thief for a position that would involve contact with money or with valuable property. There is nothing vengeful about taking prudent precautions to protect ourselves and those for whom we are responsible from per-