

SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYER
The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany¹
(Year II)

The Rev. Warren E. Shaw, Supply Priest²

Lessons:³

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the second Verse of the fifth Chapter of Micah.⁴

“... But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah [**BETH-lih-hem eff-RAH-tah**], though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting. Therefore will he give them up, until the time that she which travaileth hath brought forth: then the remnant of his brethren shall return unto the children of Israel.

“And he shall stand and feed in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God; and they shall abide: for now shall he be great unto the ends of the earth. And this man shall be the peace, when the Assyrian shall come into our land: and when he shall tread in our palaces, then shall we raise against him seven shepherds, and eight principal men. And they shall waste the land of Assyria with the sword, and the land of Nimrod [**NIM-rahd**] in the entrances thereof: thus shall he deliver us from the Assyrian, when he cometh into our land, and when he treadeth within our borders. And the remnant of Jacob shall be in the midst of many people as a dew from the LORD, as the showers upon the grass, that tarrieth not for man, nor waiteth for the sons of men.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the tenth Chapter of the Gospel according to St. John.⁵

“Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that entereth not by the door into the sheepfold, but climbeth up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber. But he that entereth in by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the porter openeth; and the sheep hear his voice: and he calleth his own sheep by name, and leadeth them out. And when he putteth forth his own sheep, he goeth before them, and the sheep follow him: for they know his voice. And a stranger will they not follow, but will flee from him: for they know not the voice of strangers. This parable spake Jesus unto them: but they understood not what things they were which he spake unto them. Then said Jesus unto them again, Verily, verily, I say unto you, I am the door of the sheep. All that ever came before me are thieves and robbers: but the sheep did not hear them. I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture. The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly. I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep. But he that is an hireling, and not the shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, seeth the wolf coming, and leaveth the sheep, and fleeth: and the wolf catcheth them, and scattereth the sheep. The hireling fleeth, because he is an hireling, and careth not for the sheep. I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine. As the Father knoweth me, even so know I the Father: and I lay down my life for the sheep. And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd. Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again. No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment have I received of my Father.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

But we are the Church if we know the mind of Christ and follow His commandments against all the wisdom of the world. Do we do that as a parish?

And while you are thinking about that, let me ask you just one more question, a personal one. In your own private life, do you hear the voice of the Good Shepherd in the midst of all the other voices around you? Do you recognize that voice and respond to it, or do you simply respond to whatever voice happens to be the loudest?

Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, as the Father knows me and I know the Father.”

Amen.

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St. Thomas Episcopal Church
Orange, VA

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¹ This sermon was originally written on the Gospel for Holy Communion on the Fourth Sunday of Easter (the Third Sunday after Easter), according to the Revised Three-Year Common Lectionary, Year B, 2006.

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³ *The Table of Lessons*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxi (Anglican Church of Canada 1962).

⁴ Micah 5:2-7 (KJV).

⁵ St. John 10:1-18 (KJV).

⁶ St. John 10:14-15 (RSV).

⁷ I John 1:1b.

church must look to Christ as the Son looks to the Father, to discern what is right in order to do what is right.

Now, let me ask a few questions. What does Our Lord see when He looks at this parish? Does he see the reflection of Himself? Does he see the projection into our time of His own character? Does Jesus see us doing the things He did when He walked this earth? Does he see us healing the sick, binding up the broken-hearted, welcoming the poor, teaching the people, challenging false leadership and self-serving power? Does He see us gladly bearing ridicule and shame for the sake of the Gospel? Does he see us overcoming temptation and pouring out our lives for each other? Or rather, does He see us destroying ourselves with petty rivalries and power struggles and rejection of those who differ from us? Does he know us as the Father knows the Son?

There are other questions that will be asked of us when we get onto conversations with about obtaining a rector. How much money do we have? What is our average pledge and our average attendance? What kind of shape is our building in? What are the demographics of our town? Such questions will need to be asked.

But the important questions are the ones that tell us whether or not we are truly part of the Church established and animated by Christ. The important questions are the ones that tell us whether we belong to Christ or to the world, or in Biblical terms whether we are the children of light or the children of darkness. Those are the questions I'm trying to put before you.

In one of his epistles, St. John says that if the world does not know us it is because it did not know Christ.⁷ The flip side is that if the world does know us, it is because we reflect the values and the standards and the methods of the world. In that case we are not really a church. We are simply another organization developed by mortals to satisfy our own aspirations.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: "I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep."⁶ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Homily:

Today's Second Lesson talks about the difference between a true shepherd and a religious leader who is simply in it for the money. I would like to suggest that there is a similar difference between a true church and a basically secular organization that simply has the appearance of a church. The key to understanding the difference lies, I believe, in this statement: "I know my own and my own know me, as the Father knows me and I know the Father."

The relationship between Christ and the Church, according to that saying, parallels the relationship between the Father and the Son in the life of the Holy Trinity. Christ knows the true Church in the same way that the Father knows the Son. The true Church knows Christ in the same way that the Son knows the Father.

I would like to work with this parallelism for a few minutes because I believe it offers insight into the real nature of the Church and, consequently, helps us to recognize the true Church when we see it.

How does the Father know the Son, and how does the Son know the Father? St. Paul calls Jesus, "the image of the invisible God." That is to say, He is the projection of perfect spirituality onto a material screen so that we who cannot see pure spirit are able to discern a reflection of it. So When the Father looks upon the Son, He recognizes Himself, just as a man recognizes his own image in a mirror.

At the same time, of course, the Son must always know the Father if indeed He is to reflect the nature of the Father. He must know the mind of the Father if He is to carry out His Father's agenda. He must know the will of the Father if He is to obey it, and obey it He must if He is to remain the eternal Son.

When the Son of God entered into human life and became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, He did not cease to reflect the character and qualities of the Father. That is what made Jesus unique. Within the context of a human life, with all the finite boundaries and limitations that implies, Jesus lived out the will and the purpose and the character of God.

When Jesus was baptized, a voice came from heaven saying, "This is my beloved Son." The same voice said the same thing in the Transfiguration scene just before the Crucifixion. The point is that God looks upon Jesus and sees His own divine characteristics of love and truth and righteousness and life-giving power reflected back to Him. He also sees a will that is perfectly aligned with His own. That is how the Father knows the Son and the Son knows the Father.

So when Jesus says that the Church stands in the same relationship to Him as He Himself stands in relationship to the Father, this is what He is saying. He is saying that the Church, the true Church, displays within its own life the same kind of love, the same kind of compassion, the same kind of prayer, the same kind of Scriptural knowledge, the same kind of courage in the face of injustice, and the same kind of willingness to sacrifice itself for the sake of the world that Jesus Himself displayed.

The Church, of course, can only do that when it truly understands the mind of Christ and is completely committed to discerning and obeying His will. Now let us apply that test to ourselves. This is good time to do it, because one of the steps in procuring a new rector is to engage in a self study—to examine ourselves and determine what kind of a parish we are and what kind of parish we want to be. From that study we develop a

profile of ourselves as a parish, and from that we develop a profile of the kind of priest for whom we are looking.

It's a long and complicated process to be sure, and we are not going to have new rector any time soon, but perhaps I can help get things started by asking a few questions that grow out of the passage before us.

How well do we in this parish know the mind of Christ, and how do we go about discerning His will? To put it another way, how do we make decisions around here? Do we really care about Our Lord's priorities? Or are we more concerned with what is important to us? Do we simply assume that whatever is important to us must be important to Christ? Many people make that assumption. Many Churches do as well.

The will of Christ has been blamed for keeping churches open when they should be closed and for closing churches when they should remain open. The will of Christ has been blamed for moving churches, when in fact it was the will of Christ for them to remain where they were. Magnificent structures have sometimes been built and great works of religious art commissioned for no better reason than to satisfy the egos of parishioners and clergy. But always it is said that it is the will of Christ.

The Episcopal Church in particular seems to be quite vulnerable to confusing the will and the leadership of Christ with the current trends of society. But discerning the will of Christ is not so simple as to be decided by a majority vote. It takes a lot of prayer, and a lot of study, and a lot of debate, and a lot of humility to arrive at the kind of consensus that emerges in the church when the mind of Christ is really understood.

The Son does not look to the Father for corroboration of what the Son has decided. The Son does not look to the Father for permission to satisfy His own desires. Likewise the Church, the true Church, does not look to Christ for corroboration of its own ideas or for permission to pursue its own desires. The