

**SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER
THE PRESENTATION OF CHRIST IN THE TEMPLE,
Commonly Called
The Purification of St. Mary the Virgin
(February 2)**

The Rev'd Warren E. Shaw, Supply Priest¹

Lessons:²

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the twenty-first Verse of the first Chapter of the First Book of Samuel, otherwise called the First Book of the Kings:³

“... And the man Elkanah [*ell-KAY-nuh*], and all his house, went up to offer unto the LORD the yearly sacrifice, and his vow. But Hannah went not up; for she said unto her husband, I will not go up until the child be weaned, and then I will bring him, that he may appear before the LORD, and there abide for ever. And Elkanah [*ell-KAY-nuh*] her husband said unto her, Do what seemeth thee good; tarry until thou hast weaned him; only the LORD establish his word. So the woman abode, and gave her son suck until she weaned him.

“And when she had weaned him, she took him up with her, with three bullocks, and one ephah of flour, and a bottle of wine, and brought him to the house of the LORD in Shiloh: and the child was young. And they slew a bullock, and brought the child to Eli. And she said, Oh my lord, as thy soul liveth, my lord, I am the woman that stood by thee here, praying unto the LORD. For this child I prayed; and the LORD hath given me my petition which I asked of him: Therefore also I have lent him to the LORD; as long as he liveth he shall be lent to the LORD. And he worshiped the LORD there.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson:⁴ Here beginneth the fourteenth Verse of the eighth Chapter of the Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Romans:⁵

“... For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God. For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father. The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together. For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God. For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope, Because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.”⁶ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Homily:

Every church, of course thinks it is the true church, that it is led by the Spirit of God, and that its members are the children of God. The Lutherans think so. The Episcopalians think so. The Roman Catholics think so. The Presbyterians, the Baptists, everybody thinks so, and we think so too.

When the Roman Catholic Church proclaimed the dogmas of the Immaculate Conception and the Bodily Assumption of Mary, it assured us all that the Holy Spirit had led it to those conclusions. When the Episcopal Church decided to ordain women and rewrite the Prayer Book and approve of same-sex marriages,

it declared in every instance that it was being led by the Spirit of God.

When the Church of England separated from the Church of Rome, it was the Holy Spirit who again took the blame for the schism. And when our own little Anglican body was established, to be independent of both Canterbury and the Episcopal Church, well, of course, those people who formed it claimed that the Spirit of God was leading them. The Pentecostals seem to think that they have a lock on the Holy Spirit, and they offer their enthusiastic worship and occasional speaking in tongues as evidence.

So here we are confronted with a myriad of churches and ecclesiastical structures, all claiming the leadership of the Holy Spirit and all claiming to be the true Church. Obviously we cannot all be right, and just as obviously, since the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of unity, we might easily question whether any of us can legitimately claim His leadership.

So what are we to do, and how do we find and identify the true Church? Jesus gives us the answer in the seventh Chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel: "You will know them by their fruits."⁷

"[E]very sound tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears evil fruit.... Thus you will know them by their fruits. 'Not everyone who says to me "Lord, Lord," shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.'"⁸

We all understand that, don't we. We deal with politicians that way all the time. They make speeches and proclamations and statements and we don't really pay much attention. What matters is not what they say but what they do. We look at their voting records, their past accomplishments, the way they live their lives away from the cameras and the microphones, and that's how we make our judgments about public servants. And so it is with churches: "You will know them by their fruits."⁹

But what are the fruits for which we are to look? What are the characteristics of a church that is really being led by Spirit of God? Well, here we can get some help from the Apostle Paul.

In the epistle to the Galatians St. Paul gives a list. It includes “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faith, meekness, and temperance.” He also gives a list of evil fruits, which, of course, are not of the Holy Spirit. That list includes things like adultery, sexual debauchery, idolatry, occult practices, anger, strife, heresy, jealousy, drunkenness, and orgies. Wherever you see those things, says the Apostle, you are witnessing the leadership of the world and not the leadership of the Holy Spirit.

So it’s really a very simple matter. We all know love and kindness and goodness when we see them. We all know anger and jealousy and debauchery when we see them. Those are the things we need to look for when we are seeking the true Church.

Our behaviors are rooted in our beliefs, and it is also true that morality develops out of doctrine. So we do need to learn the teachings of any church with which we decide to affiliate. But we don’t need to study doctrine in order to recognize the true Church when we see it. We simply need to look at the behaviors and attitudes of its leaders and its people.

Conclusion:

That’s what visitors do when they consider joining a church. So I conclude with the obvious question. When people look at this church, what kind of behaviors and attitudes do they see? Do they see the fruit of the Spirit of God, or the fruit of some other spirit? What kind of tree is this congregation?

Please don’t tell me. Just show me.

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² *Psalms and Lessons for the Fixed Holy Days* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xliv (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).
³ I Samuel 1:21-end (KJV).
⁴ After Septuagesima. Before Septuagesima, the Second Lesson is Galatians 4:1-7.
⁵ Romans 8:14-21 (KJV).
⁶ Romans 8:14 (RSV).
⁷ St. Matthew 7:16 (RSV).
⁸ St. Matthew 7:17, 20-21 (RSV).
⁹ St. Matthew 7:16 (RSV).