

Gesima 1 (Septuagesima)

Morning Prayer A

First Lesson: Joshua 1:1-9

Second Lesson: 2 Tim 2:1-13

Homily

Today we enter a little season of transition.
 Our festivities celebrating the Incarnation are past
 We know that He became man,
 that He lived among us, lives among us still,
 and shall come again.
 We are on the threshold
 of the solemn remembrance of the mighty acts
 by which we have salvation:
 -- the sacrifice of the Cross,
 and the triumph of the Resurrection.
 After these three "Gesimas"
 comes the solemn preparation we call "Lent",
 forty days set aside to think upon our sins
 and our need for forgiveness and change.
 How do we know what is sin?
 How can we distinguish between good and evil?
 What requires repentance and cleansing?

The creation story in Genesis 2 and 3
 deals with that.

Adam and Eve are instructed
 not to eat from one tree,
 the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.
 When the serpent tempted Eve, he said,
*"... in the day ye eat thereof,
 then your eyes shall be opened,
 and ye shall be as gods,
 knowing good and evil."*
 They ate, and they experienced condemnation.
 Why?

Might it be
 that they would not accept God's judgment?
 That they insisted on their own ability
 to decide what is right?
 "Ye shall be as gods," said the tempter.
 Is that the prerogative of mankind?
 "I am the Lord and there is none other,"
 says the only One with that authority.
 It is God who created natural law,
 and it is God who revealed the Law in His Word.

That is at the heart of what makes us
 Continuing Anglicans.
 It's not about what we like or don't like.
 It's not that we want to do things
 like we've always done them.
 It's not because of a new Prayer Book,

or because of the introduction of bad music,
 or because it doesn't look or sound right
 to have a woman up front,
 or because some people's lifestyle gives us the
 willies.

All of those things may matter,
 but they are not the issue.

Why then are we separate
 from the church we once called home?
 It's for a much greater reason than any of that.
 It's because God is God,
 because He and He alone decides
 what is good and evil,
 because He and He alone decides
 how His people should live,
 and how His Church should serve Him.
 He Himself declares,
 and we quote Him in the Decalogue:
*"I am the Lord thy God; Thou shalt have none other
 gods but me"*

Note how, in our Old Testament Lesson,
 God had appointed Moses as leader of His people,
 and how he said to Joshua:
*"Moses my servant is dead;
 now therefore arise, go over this Jordan,
 thou, and all this people,*

unto the land which I do give to them"

God chose the leader.

The people did not.

Note in the New Testament Lesson,
 written by St. Paul, one appointed directly by God,
 how he says to St. Timothy, his follower,
*"...the things that thou hast heard of me among many
 witnesses,*

*the same commit thou to faithful men,
 who shall be able to teach others also."*

A God-appointed succession of leaders,
 entrusted with a truth they can only pass on,
 a truth they are not authorized to change.

Listen to what God said to Joshua:

*"Only be thou strong and very courageous,
 that thou mayest observe to do
 according to all the law,
 which Moses my servant commanded thee:
 turn not from it to the right hand or to the left,
 that thou mayest prosper withersoever thou goest.
 This book of the law shall not depart out of thy
 mouth;
 but thou shalt meditate therein day and night,
 that thou mayest observe to do
 according to all that is written therein:*

*for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous,
and then thou shalt have good success.
Have not I commanded thee?
Be strong and of a good courage;
be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed:
for the LORD thy God is with thee
whithersoever thou goest."*

Our strength and our assurance that God is with us
depend upon this one thing:
that we hear and obey,
and that we do it his way.

And St. Paul said this:

*"... if a man also strive for masteries,
yet is he not crowned, except he strive lawfully."*

How many sports figures have had their titles taken
away
because they did not follow the rules?
They seemed to have won, but, in truth, they had not.
What they had done is to have cheated.
We can decide for ourselves what seems reasonable,
but if it's not what God has chosen,
it's cheating, and brings condemnation.

Sin is not doing things that we see as bad.

It's not the things that disgust us.
Sin is doing what displeases God,
even when it looks very good indeed to us.
Are we committed to follow Him.
even when we don't want to?
Even when we want to disagree with Him?
In two and a half weeks
we begin the great fast of Lent.
As we meditate upon our sins,
as we come to Him for forgiveness,
let us ask him to make us
truly submissive to His will.

Let us pray.

Direct us, O lord, in all our doings, with thy most
gracious favour, and further us with thy continual
help; that in all our works begun, continued, and
ended in thee, we may glorify thy holy Name, and
finally, by thy mercy, obtain everlasting life; through
Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Gesima 1 (Septuagesima)

Morning Prayer B

First Lesson: Ezek 3:4-11

Second Lesson: Matt 5:1-16

Homily

Our first lesson, the passage from Ezekiel, makes it clear that today's message is not primarily for nonbelievers, but for the House of Israel, that is, for those who believe - for the Church, but for the Church seen as a rebellious house, as those who have been chosen, but yet manage not to hear the heart of the message. In other words, as we approach the solemnity of Lent, we are being called to see how far we ourselves have strayed from our divine calling.

Our second lesson, then, is to be seen that way. It is what is known as "The Beatitudes" from Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount, much quoted and beloved words, valued for their beauty,

and for the comfort they seem to offer, but, in truth, these words are more challenging than comforting.

They look deep within our minds and spirits.

They challenge us in a yet more fundamental way than even the Ten Commandments.

Let's take a detailed look:

*Blessed are the poor in spirit:
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

What do we value?

Is it the things we have, however much or little?

Is it the things we might be able to obtain?

Will there be a U-Haul behind our hearse?

Or do we know in our hearts that we own nothing, except the promise of God?

If this last is true,
the kingdom of heaven is ours.

*Blessed are they that mourn:]
for they shall be comforted.*

The comfortable have their reward,
but those who know their sinfulness and mourn,
shall know the comfort of redemption.

*Blessed are the meek:
for they shall inherit the earth.*

"Look out for Number One," they say,
but, as St. Paul said,
we are called to prefer one another.
Greatness comes not from striving to get,
but from serving and giving.

*Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst
after righteousness: for they shall be filled.*

What is it we really want?
Is our heart and soul dedicated to pleasing God?
or are we more interested in pleasing ourselves?
We will be filled with what we seek.

*Blessed are the merciful:
for they shall obtain mercy.*

"Forgive us ... as we forgive"
is what He taught us to pray,
not, "forgive me, but not him."

*Blessed are the pure in heart:
for they shall see God.*

Can we see God through what is in our hearts?

*Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be
called the children of God.*

There's at least as much gossip and strife,
and maybe more,
in the Church as there is outside.
Do we really act like Children of God?

*Blessed are they which are persecuted
for righteousness' sake:
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you,
and persecute you, and shall say
all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake.
Rejoice, and be exceeding glad:
for great is your reward in heaven:
for so persecuted they the prophets
which were before you.*

Do we grumble when our faith costs us something?
Do we hide our faith lest someone criticize us for it?
Or do we rejoice
in the chance to stand up for God?

God has placed us here to make a difference,
to proclaim openly with out words,
but especially with our lives,

that He is real,
and that He is Redeemer and Deliverer.

Thus He concludes:

*Ye are the salt of the earth:
but if the salt have lost his savour,
wherewith shall it be salted?
it is thenceforth good for nothing,
but to be cast out,
and to be trodden under foot of men.
Ye are the light of the world.
A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid.
Neither do men light a candle,
and put it under a bushel,
but on a candlestick;
and it giveth light unto all that are in the house.
Let your light so shine before men, that they may see
your good works,
and glorify your Father which is in heaven.*

May we so shine, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Gesima 1 (Septuagesima)

Evening Prayer A

First Lesson: 1 Macc. 2:49-64

Second Lesson: 1 Tim 6:11-19

Homily

Dietrich Bonhoeffer,
a German pastor who died for his faith under Hitler,
wrote a well-known book, "The Cost of Discipleship,"
in which he discussed the radical nature of Christian
commitment,
and the high price it may involve.
This is the theme of today's lessons.

We hear of a long list of the faithful of the Old
Testament,
each of whom endured considerable hardship in
serving God.

There were Abraham and Joseph and Phineas;
There was Joshua (called "Jesus" in the Greek),
and Caleb and David and Elijah (called Elias),
and the Three Hebrew Children, and Daniel;
and there were the Maccabees themselves,

who fought long and hard
to prevent the destruction of true religion.

St. Paul wrote St. Timothy
to "Fight the good fight."
And St. Paul himself, remember,
like all the Apostles,
suffered greatly for the faith,
and, like all but St. John,
died as a martyr.
And martyrs, through the centuries,
have been the life of the Church,
with probably more dying for the faith of Christ
in the twentieth century, than ever before.

This is reality.
This is what Our Lord and Master
expected our life to be.
We are not called to comfort and ease.
We are not called to wield the power of this world.
He gave us our orders:
"Take up your cross, and follow Me."
A cross is not pleasant.
A cross grants no privileges.
A cross is ugly, painful, and looks like defeat.
But, "In the Cross of Christ I glory"
through and with His Cross,
at the Holy Eucharist,

"we present ourselves, our souls and bodies,
to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice."
-- our cross.

It seems appropriate,
in these three weeks before Lent,
as we get ready to lament our sins before God,
that we consider the nature of sin,
and that's not always done
by listing what is forbidden,
but often by examining what a holy life looks like.

Are you aware of the main course of study
when bank tellers are taught
how to identify counterfeit bills?
The emphasis is not
on what is wrong with a fake bill.
There are so many possibilities
that would be hopeless.
The main thing is to know
what a real one looks like.
One that doesn't look like that is phony.

Our Lord said,
"By their fruits ye shall know them."
You see, salvation is a free gift of God.
You can't earn it. You can't deserve it.
It was bought and paid for by the Blood of Christ.

Yes, it IS free -- but it's not cheap.
If we are vessels of the grace of God,
there is fruit -- it shows.
A Christian lives differently from the world around
him.
He's not showing off,
not trying to get credit from men,
but, if he is living his faith,
it's as Jesus commanded:

*"Let your light so shine before men,
that they may see your good works,
and glorify your Father in heaven."*

Does that always get praise from men?
Don't plan on it.
This is a fallen world.
A life of holiness will challenge the comfort
of those who will not follow God.
A Christian loves those
that people expect us to hate.
A Christian refuses to do
much of what the world considers essential.
A Christian, without even speaking judgment,
by walking in holiness,
condemns the pervasive sin,
in effect, the ordinary lifestyles
of those around him.

It's not easy to be a Christian in a world like this.
 It makes the Devil mad.
 It produces anger in some of the people around us.
 It provokes persecution.
 In parts of the world today,
 Christians are being imprisoned,
 even killed.
 In 'safe places' such as we live in,
 the difference is only in degree.
 If we are steadfast,
 we will be derided,
 we will be lied about,
 we will lose out
 on some of the comforts and privileges
 that a 'secular' citizen is entitled to.
 That will happen even when those in power
 claim the name of Christ.

Are we comfortable?
 Maybe that's not a good thing.
 Maybe it's a sign that our following is weak.

Let us pray.

The righteous shall rejoice in thy strength, O Lord;
 exceeding glad shall he be in thy salvation. ... thou
 hast gone before him with the blessings of goodness,

and hast set a crown of pure gold upon his head.
 Grant, O Lord, that we may stand among the
 company of witnesses, and that, by their example
 and prayers, we may be established in the love of thy
 holy Name, through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Gesima 1 (Septuagesima)

Evening Prayer B

First Lesson: Isa 5:1-7

Second Lesson: Matt 21:23-32

Homily

George had two boys.

Henry, the elder, was a sullen sort, bristling angrily at every suggestion that he should do something, always threatening to do exactly the opposite of what George asked.

His parents were often angry with him, and always deeply worried as to what he would become.

John, the younger, was just the opposite.

He was a charming and agreeable young man, the very model of a good son.

As one might have expected, when George needed some work done,

he asked Henry to do it, and Henry refused.

So, he went to John.

John's answer? -- a cheery, "OK, Dad, I'll take care of it."

John, however, didn't do it.

Henry, seeing the job was still undone, and knowing it had to be done, changed his mind and did the job. Which one was obedient?

That was the little story Jesus told. Isaiah wrote a little song on a similar subject. He sang of a vineyard, planted and lovingly tended, fenced and fertilized and nurtured, even guarded from wild animals and thieves. What a pretty little vineyard it was, and so full of promise! But it was ultimately worthless. It would not give good grapes, and it was abandoned.

*For, said he,
the vineyard of the LORD of hosts
is the house of Israel,
and the men of Judah his pleasant plant:
and he looked for judgment,
but behold oppression;
for righteousness, but behold a cry.*

We know the history,
how God had a chosen people,

how that people was always rebelling against Him,
 how he continually called them back,
 until, finally,
 having sent his only-begotten Son,
 he called a new people from the old,
 and grafted to them many strangers,
 and replaced them.

We also know how he said to the new chosen,
 "The gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

God made an everlasting covenant
 with his original people Israel,
 and promised in His faithfulness
 that he would not abandon them,
 and He did not,
 instead He blessed and called
 those who were faithful,
 and led them, a remnant,
 in the paths he had chosen.

However,
 like the vineyard,
 the people he had called
 did not cooperate,
 did not obey,
 and did not bring forth the intended fruit,
 and, like the son John,
 they promised but did not do.

Isn't that the way things go,
 over and over again?
 The chosen people of Israel,
 the Church of God of the New Covenant,
 all the daughter churches
 of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church,
 everywhere you look,
 it's the same story.
 It's off to a good start.
 God calls and nurtures,
 and the people start off excited and faithful,
 but the pressures of the world,
 and the pride and lust that fill men's hearts
 draw them away.
 It becomes too difficult to continue on.
 Hearts become lukewarm, and then rebel.

Maybe you're pointing fingers now at the troubles
 that are bringing down the Anglican Communion.
 Perhaps you are right in applying it that way,
 but don't stop now.
 Examine yourself.
 What kind of vineyard are you?
 Which brother are you like?
 Lent is coming, a time of self-examination,
 of penitence and fasting and prayer.
 Remember these thoughts.

Let us pray once again the words of today's collect.

O Lord, we beseech thee favorably to hear the prayers of thy people; that we, who are justly punished for our offenses, may be mercifully delivered by thy goodness, for the glory of thy Name; through Jesus Christ our Saviour, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost ever, one God, world without end. Amen.