

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER

The Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity¹

Lessons:

The First Lesson:² Here beginneth the twenty-fourth Chapter of the Book of Job.³

“Why, seeing times are not hidden from the Almighty, do they that know him not see his days? Some remove the landmarks; they violently take away flocks, and feed thereof. They drive away the ass of the fatherless, they take the widow’s ox for a pledge. They turn the needy out of the way: the poor of the earth hide themselves together. Behold, as wild asses in the desert, go they forth to their work; rising betimes for a prey: the wilderness yieldeth food for them and for their children. They reap every one his corn in the field: and they gather the vintage of the wicked. They cause the naked to lodge without clothing, that they have no covering in the cold. They are wet with the showers of the mountains, and embrace the rock for want of a shelter. They pluck the fatherless from the breast, and take a pledge of the poor. They cause him to go naked without clothing, and they take away the sheaf from the hungry; Which make oil within their walls, and tread their wine presses, and suffer thirst. Men groan from out of the city, and the soul of the wounded crieth out: yet God layeth not folly to them. They are of those that rebel against the light; they know not the ways thereof, nor abide in the paths thereof. The murderer rising with the light killeth the poor and needy, and in the night is as a thief. The eye also of the adulterer waiteth for the twilight, saying, No eye shall see me: and disguiseth his face. In the dark they dig through houses, which they had marked for themselves in the daytime: they know not the light. For the morning is to them even as the shadow of death: if one know them, they are in the terrors of the shadow of death.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson:⁴ Here beginneth the ninth Chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew.⁵

“Jesus entered into a ship, and passed over, and came into his own city. And, behold, they brought to him a man sick of the palsy, lying on a bed: and Jesus, seeing their faith, said unto the sick of the palsy; Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee. And, behold, certain of the scribes said within themselves, This man

blasphemeth. And Jesus knowing their thoughts said, Wherefore think ye evil in your hearts? For whether is easier, to say, Thy sins be forgiven thee; or to say, Arise, and walk? But that ye may know that the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins, (then saith [SETH] he to the sick of the palsy,) Arise, take up thy bed, and go unto thine house. And he arose, and departed to his house. But when the multitudes saw it, they marvelled, and glorified God, which had given such power unto men.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “*But that ye may know that the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins, (then saith he to the sick of the palsy,) Arise, take up thy bed, and go unto thine house.*” In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Homily:

It may appear strange that Jesus addressed the need of a sick man, in fact a completely paralyzed man, by speaking an ever so bold absolution: “*Thy sins be forgiven thee.*” The Pharisees thought He was blaspheming, because their religious system allowed no man to speak so boldly. They figured that we may hope for forgiveness of sins, but they were offended by the bold declaration that any particular individual’s sins actually have been forgiven. That much faith was more than they could swallow.

Today people may find the words of Jesus to be an affront to their sensitivities, wondering how He could address a suffering person about sin. They might assume it is fine to feel empathy, to address the obvious visible needs of a man paralyzed, and no doubt would approve of words that were intended to establish the full equality of the man, perhaps with a phrase like, “mobility-challenged”.

But Jesus addressed the man’s spiritual and moral need first and foremost, because that is most important. The highest priority of all is to have a fully restored and meaningful communion with God, to be reconciled to God and to be free from any hindrance in that fellowship that is the highest priority, that knowledge of God before which even the fear of death yields and retreats. Compared to that greatest

need of all, mere paralysis is trivial. So is blindness, deafness, and even premature death, all of them among the many conditions that Jesus healed as “*with power [He] went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the devil.*”⁶

Right now, just like the offended Pharisees, many people would like very much to have a religion in which the subject of forgiveness never comes up, because sin is treated as either non-existent, or as trivial. They want a more “spiritual” religion, and they even use the word “spiritual” or “spirituality” because it is non-threatening. It has, in modern times, no moral significance whatsoever.

If that is the kind of religion you want, the kind that allows you to flatter yourself and convince yourself that you are righteous, wise and “spiritual”—whatever you imagine that the word is supposed to mean—then you are in the wrong church. The Book of Common Prayer has a General Confession of Sin in every major service, followed by Absolution that a priest declares (if one is present), and that is because we must approach God based on the truth, not based on our own feeling or our self-appraisal. Furthermore, if you want a religion that flatters you and makes you feel affirmed and tells you how wonderful you are, you should avoid the Book of Common Prayer, yes, but even more so, never, ever, under any circumstances read your Bible.

The wisdom of the Book of Common Prayer, all of which comes from the Bible (as anyone can see, anyone who actually knows the Bible), is that it approaches God always based on His revelation of Himself, and of His Gospel, that He has given for all people for all times. If you must ask the origin of any portion of the Book of Common Prayer, or wonder where it came from, then it is clear that any knowledge you have of the Bible is poor, or shallow, or superficial.

Otherwise, you would see the words in the Prayer Book, and know where they came from; they have all come right out of the Bible, ultimately, as the actual source (and that includes the content of the Creeds). And among them you would recall the words of Jesus, quoted in Morning Prayer as we begin: “*The hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him.*”⁷

You cannot worship God in spirit by flattering yourself that you are “spiritual,” because the spirit that pleases God is one of humility. And you cannot worship God in truth without acknowledging the truth He has revealed as He has revealed it.

Once upon a time I was concerned about the spiritual malady called “self-righteousness” as merely a problem of hypocrisy. I have become aware of a deeper kind of self-righteousness, and that is the kind that is delusional. Some individuals, despite the clear words of Scripture in which God speaks to us even now, really believe in their own righteousness. That delusion is a sickness worse than paralysis, and one that will create a wall of division separating a person from communion with God, and from communion or fellowship within His Church among His people.

We see this delusion expressed as a doctrine among some Pentecostals and other Fundamentalists who openly say. “I was a sinner, but now I am a saint.” But Saint Paul said, “*This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief.*”⁸ He was a saint, but he did not say, “Of whom I *was* chief,” past tense: He said, “Of whom I *am* chief,” present tense. The doctrinal formula for this is *simul iustus et peccator*, that is, “simultaneously just (righteous) and a sinner.” At best, that is the condition we are in as we walk through this life.

In St. Paul’s words, we see this in terms of our ultimate hope, the sure and certain hope of the Resurrection on the Last Day: “*But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the first fruits of them that slept. For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.*”⁹

Ultimately, if we are in Christ and live in Him, we will live by Him, drawing our whole life from His immortal resurrected life, risen from the dead, and glorified with Him as “*partakers of the Divine nature.*”¹⁰ But we are not there yet. Right now we are in two fathers. In Adam we die, and in Christ we live. That is, we live in the reality of *simul iustus et peccator*. There is, in this life in this world, no escaping the mortal condition we have in Adam, nor is there any escaping the need to pray as our Prayer Book guides us, confessing our sins as we approach the Holy God on His throne. But because the other fact is also completely true for all who believe, we really do approach His throne with joy because we are “*in Christ.*” We may enter into His presence, and come before His throne, in the words of Scripture, “*having boldness to enter in.*” The Epistle to the Hebrews is where you will find these words:

“Now where remission of [sins] is, there is no more offering for sin. Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, By a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh; And having an high priest over the house of God; Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; (for he is faithful that promised).”¹¹

This is what Martin Luther meant when he said to “sin boldly”. He did not mean to be bold in how you sin, nor did he mean that you should presume to live in willful unrepentant sin (for, that is the way to eternal death). Rather he meant that you should be bold about entering God’s presence with faith, because in Christ you are truly justified.

You may enter just as the writer to the Hebrews says, with boldness, and that is not boldness for just any old reason. You do not enter with boldness into God’s presence because you see yourself as righteous, wise and spiritual. You enter in “*with full assurance of faith,*” only because you have been granted entrance into the most Holy Place before the throne of God “*by the blood of Jesus.*” That alone is how you have been granted entrance, and that alone is why you are accepted.

Our Confession of Sin is not morbid. It is not gloomy. It is not the Confession of people living in terror of the grave, unsure if they have enough merits for eternal life (which, you may be sure, no one has; not even the people with word “Saint” placed before their names). Our Confession of sin is based on our certain faith in God’s love and forgiveness, not because we feel that He is forgiving, but because, in fact, Jesus Christ died for our sins and reconciled us to the Father.

And, in fact, He rose from the dead so that we may live in Him, now and forever, eventually, on that glorious Day, shedding what it means to be “*in Adam*” and taking on only what it means to be “*in Christ.*” We worship God in spirit and in truth, if we grasp the meaning of today’s Collect:

“O God, forasmuch as without thee we are not able to please thee; Mercifully grant that thy Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”

That comes directly from the words of Jesus: “*I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing.*”¹²

So, just as Jesus began by speaking words of Absolution, and healing the soul of the paralyzed man before meeting his physical need, I will continue to address, in my preaching, the true diagnosis of what ails us all. Along with that, I will continue to proclaim God’s revealed prognosis for everyone who takes the medicine He prescribes: “*As in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.*”



The Rev’d Robert Hart¹³
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¹ This sermon was originally written on the Gospel for Holy Communion on the Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity, 2011.

² *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxxvi (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

³ Job 24:1-17 (KJV).

⁴ “Upon any Sunday or Holy Day, the Minister may read the Epistle or the Gospel of the Day in place of the Second Lesson at Morning or Evening Prayer.” *Concerning the Service of the Church*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER viii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

⁵ St. Matthew 9:1-8 (KJV).

⁶ Acts 10:38 (KJV).

⁷ St. John 4:23 (KJV).

⁸ I Timothy 1:15.

⁹ I Corinthians 15:20-22 (KJV).

¹⁰ II Peter 1:4 (KJV).

¹¹ Hebrews 10:18-22 (KJV).

¹² St. John 15:5 (KJV).

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