

Sermon for Morning Prayer
The Second Sunday Before Advent
(Trinity XXIII, 2009)

Lessons:ⁱ

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the sixty-sixth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.ⁱⁱ

“Thus saith the LORD, The heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool: where is the house that ye build unto me? and where is the place of my rest? For all those things hath mine hand made, and all those things have been, saith the LORD: but to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word.

“ . . .

“ . . . Rejoice ye with Jerusalem, and be glad with her, all ye that love her: rejoice for joy with her, all ye that mourn for her. . . . For thus saith the LORD, Behold, I will extend peace to her like a river, and the glory of the Gentiles like a flowing stream: then shall ye suck, ye shall be borne upon her sides, and be dandled upon her knees. As one whom his mother comforteth, so will I comfort you; and ye shall be comforted in Jerusalem. And when ye see this, your heart shall rejoice, and your bones shall flourish like an herb: and the hand of the LORD shall be known toward his servants, and his indignation toward his enemies. For, behold, the LORD will come with fire, and with his chariots like a whirlwind, to render his anger with fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire. For by fire and by his sword will the LORD plead with all flesh: and the slain of the LORD shall be many. . . . For I know their works and their thoughts: it shall come, that I will gather all nations and tongues; and they shall come, and see my glory. And I will set a sign among them, and I will send those that escape of them unto the nations, to Tarshish [TARR-shish], Pul [POOL], and Lud [LUDD], that draw the bow, to Tubal [TWO-ball], and Javan [DGAH-vann], to the isles afar off, that have not heard my fame, neither have seen my glory; and they shall declare my glory among the Gentiles. And they shall bring all your brethren for an offering unto the LORD out of all nations upon horses, and in chariots, and in litters, and upon mules, and upon swift beasts, to my holy mountain Jerusalem, saith the LORD, as the children of Israel bring an offering in a clean vessel into the house of the LORD. And I will also take of them for priests and for Levites, saith the LORD. For as

the new heavens and the new earth, which I will make, shall remain before me, saith the LORD, so shall your seed and your name remain. And it shall come to pass, that from one new moon to another, and from one sabbath to another, shall all flesh come to worship before me, saith the LORD.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the first Chapter of the Second Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Thessalonians.ⁱⁱⁱ

“Paul, and Silvanus, and Timotheus, unto the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace unto you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is meet, because that your faith groweth exceedingly, and the charity of every one of you all toward each other aboundeth; So that we ourselves glory in you in the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that ye endure: Which is a manifest token of the righteous judgment of God, that ye may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which ye also suffer: Seeing it is a righteous thing with God to recompense tribulation to them that trouble you; And to you who are troubled rest with us, when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels, In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power; When he shall come to be glorified in his saints, and to be admired in all them that believe (because our testimony among you was believed) in that day. Wherefore also we pray always for you, that our God would count you worthy of this calling, and fulfil all the good pleasure of his goodness, and the work of faith with power: That the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you, and ye in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “[I]t is a righteous thing with God to recompense tribulation to them that trouble you. . . .”^{iv}

In the Name of the Father, and of the ☩ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Homily:

Today’s Second Lesson sets forth, in uncompromising fashion, several unpalatable truths. One of those truths is that if we are faithful Christians, then we will suffer in this world. We may be so fortunate that our lives are not at risk, as they were for many in Apostolic times, but that is only true for those of us who live in the West; elsewhere today, especially in the Middle East and Far East, persecuted Christians are in daily fear of their lives.

Although the consequences are much milder than mutilation and death, it is inconvenient and unpleasant that even here in the comfortable West, congregations and organizations that adhere to Christian teachings are threatened with adverse taxation consequences and actions by so-called “civil rights” enforcement authorities, Christian scholars are refused positions at prestigious universities, and committed Christians in general are mocked and caricatured in the mainstream news media and by the celebrity molders of opinion.

If we send our children to government-operated schools, then without our consent and in the name of cultural diversity, they may be subjected to the teachings and practices of any religion whatsoever, provided only that the religion in question is not Christianity.

Closely related to this truth of persecution – or, for those of us more fortunate, at least of irritation – for our Faith is the related truth that we, as Christians, are required to bear our troubles with patience and fortitude. Thus St. Paul could write, in today’s Second Lesson, “your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations . . . is a manifest token of the righteous judgment of God. . . .”^v

I myself have a particular problem with that sort of patience. When I meet up with even the mild sorts of persecution that are endemic

to our society, I immediately want to lash out at our persecutors, ridiculing their hypocrisies and inconsistencies, holding up to derision their twisted logic and self-satisfied but unprovable assumptions. Making fun of others can be deeply satisfying precisely because it can be deeply wounding; as the old rabbis warned observant Jews, taking a man's good name may be worse than murdering him.

But this type of revenge, administered as it is in the terms and conditions of this unholy world, is bad for my soul. Implicit in it is the great failing that lies at the bottom of all of what are rightly called "the cold-blooded sins": it sets me up to believe that I am in some way better than those of whom I make such fun.

When I take that sort of very natural, very human revenge for the pricks and scratches of political and social life, I am implicitly – but nonetheless very truly – saying to myself, as well as to those others, that I am truer to my principles, more consistent in their application, more logical, and a sounder thinker than are those I ridicule. In other words, I am reaffirming that I am an all-around gentleman, scholar, and judge of good whiskey, a person of infinitely greater worth in my eyes – and therefore also in the eyes of God, if He knows what He is about – than are my victims.

And, yes, they *are* my victims, because instead of trying gently and charitably to correct their errors, I have exacerbated and capitalized on those errors to deepen the divide between us. Sometimes patience and a tolerant faith will enable me to reason with them; sometimes nothing less than the witness of my uncomplaining suffering will do the trick. It was, after all, the patient witness of the Christian martyrs that ultimately brought down the haughty pagan Roman state and converted it to Christianity.

It is not often that Machiavellian tactical considerations are also good theology, but this is one of those rare areas where the most charitable responses are also often the most pragmatic. As country folk used to say, "You catch more flies with sugar than you do with vinegar."

I received firm proof of this only two days ago. A couple of years ago, I began becoming acquainted with a very articulate, well-educated

priest who was then in another traditional Anglican jurisdiction. He was, and is, an admirable and charismatic man, deeply learned in traditional theology, just the sort of minister we would like to have among us. Unfortunately, however, he strongly blamed the Anglican Catholic Church for having caused the most important splits among Continuing Anglicans and saw the ACC as the principal obstacle to Continuing Anglican unity.

At the same time, another of our priests and one of our bishops were in regular communication with this man. Over the course of the last two years, they gently reasoned with him, choosing suitable moments to explain, as charitably as possible, our version of the events that led up to those splits and divisions that affronted him so much. Ultimately their patience and humility won him over; late last year, he was received into the ACC and, a couple of months ago now, he took over responsibility for one of our more significant congregations.

By itself, that outcome alone would have been cause for rejoicing and would more than have repaid the slow and understanding efforts of that priest and that bishop. However, it has led to more. Just last night this priest posted a comment on a widely-read and well-respected internet forum; these are his exact words, directed to others outside the ACC who are in the process of being abandoned by their leaders:

“Everything I was told about the ACC before I met the people in it, and learned the facts, was a flat out lie, often repeated by someone who truly believed it.”

I am certain that both the priest and the bishop concerned took that ringing public testimony as more than sufficient reward for their patience and efforts to overcome the criticisms of us and the prejudices against us that this man once broadcast to the world. From our critic, they have turned him into our champion, so now his many gifts are being used, not to tear us down but, most literally, to build us up.

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The Rev'd Canon John A. Hollister^{vi}
November 15, 2009.

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

ⁱⁱ *Isaiah 66: 1-2, 10, 12-16, 18-23 (KJV).*

ⁱⁱⁱ *II Thessalonians 1: 1-12 (KJV).*

^{iv} *II Thessalonians 1: 6 (KJV).*

^v *II Thessalonians 1: 4b-5a (KJV).*

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