

Sermon for Morning Prayer The Second Sunday after Easter

Lessons: ⁱ

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the twenty-first Verse of the fourth Chapter of Baruch. ⁱⁱ

“... Be of good cheer, O my children, cry unto the Lord, and he will deliver you from the power and hand of the enemies. For my hope is in the Everlasting, that he will save you; and joy is come unto me from the Holy One, because of the mercy which shall soon come unto you from the Everlasting our Saviour. For I sent you out with mourning and weeping: but God will give you to me again with joy and gladness for ever. Like as now the neighbours of Sion have seen your captivity: so shall they see shortly your salvation from our God which shall come upon you with great glory, and brightness of the Everlasting. My children, suffer patiently the wrath that is come upon you from God: for thine enemy hath persecuted thee; but shortly thou shalt see his destruction, and shalt tread upon his neck. My delicate ones have gone rough ways, and were taken away as a flock caught of the enemies. Be of good comfort, O my children, and cry unto God: for ye shall be remembered of him that brought these things upon you. For as it was your mind to go astray from God: so, being returned, seek him ten times more. For he that hath brought these plagues upon you shall bring you everlasting joy with your salvation. Take a good heart, O Jerusalem: for he that gave thee that name will comfort thee.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the seventh Verse of the third Chapter of the Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Philippians. ⁱⁱⁱ

“... But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ, And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of

the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith: That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death; If by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead. Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus. Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. Let us therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded: and if in any thing ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you. Nevertheless, whereto we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us mind the same thing.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the First Lesson: “Take courage, my children, cry to God, and he will deliver you from the power and hand of the enemy.”^{iv} In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Introduction:

There is at least one constant theme throughout the Old Testament prophecies about the One who was to come and save Israel – even though those prophecies did not always tend to agree among themselves as to precisely what the perils were from which Israel was to be saved or just how these ill-defined perils were to be surmounted.

Theme:

That one constant theme was that, as Baruch recorded in today’s First Lesson, the people of Israel would eventually find themselves in some dire straits; in that extremity, they would call upon God for aid; and, in response to their supplications, God would deliver them safely from the machinations of their enemy or enemies.

This is what Baruch meant when he wrote, at the beginning of today's pericope^v [**peh-RICK-uh-pea**]: "Take courage, my children, cry to God, and he will deliver you from the power and hand of the enemy."^{vi}

Development:

Given this language about deliverance and powerful enemies, it is not difficult to see how it was that the Jews of Our Lord's day – conquered and occupied by the might of the Roman Empire -- had come to interpret these prophecies to mean that God would send them a political and military leader who would re-enact the triumphs of the Old Testament "judges" who had led the Israelites to victory over the Canaanites [**CANE-en-ights**] and Philistines.

Of course, from our Christian perspective and looking back with two thousand years of hind-sight, we recognize that those ancient Jews got it wrong. God had not been promising them the political and military salvation of their national existence. This was so even though that nation was, in their eyes as in ours, founded by God and, moreover, was a theocracy that was in theory placed under God's sovereignty. So for those Jews who suffered under Roman control, their nation's independent existence was, in many ways, a religious matter and not the purely secular preoccupation that it would have been for us.

Instead, God sent them a Savior who offered to save them not from the Romans but from themselves, who promised not independence from Rome but union with God, who denounced not the foreign culture of Greece but their own besetting sins. He did little or nothing to improve their lives here on earth but He offered them eternal lives with God in heaven.

This is what the prophet meant when he sang "For I have put my hope in the Everlasting to save you, and joy has come unto me from the Holy One, because of the mercy which soon will come to you from your everlasting Savior."^{vii}

But we should not let ourselves feel too superior to those old Israelites who mistook what was actually being promised by the prophets who spoke to them in God's name. Yes, we have the advantage of knowing how the story played out and ended. We know, for example, that in 66 A.D., barely thirty years after the Jerusalem mob cried out for Christ's blood in its anger that He was *not* a political or military revolutionary, those Jews rose in rebellion against the Romans.

We know, too, that the Romans under Vespasian and Titus suppressed that rebellion with bloody fury, besieged and captured the city of Jerusalem, destroyed the Jewish Temple, and drove the Jewish people from their homeland. And for 1,400 years, there would be no Jewish political or military entity.

So, knowing where those secular aspirations actually led, it is easy for us to compare our superior understanding of God's saving message to the ancients' defective appreciation of it. Naturally, that comparison is all to our benefit and to their discredit.

But – *do* we in fact understand it more fully or more correctly than they did? Do we? What do we think God is really saying to us when His prophet tells us: “For I sent you out with sorrow and weeping but God will give you back to me with joy and gladness for ever.”^{viii}

Sitting here this morning, we can tell ourselves that, of course, we realize that God is here speaking of elevated spiritual betterment, not grubby secular improvement. But – *do* we, in our hearts of hearts, actually believe that?

On your drive over there this morning, perhaps you turned on the radio in your automobile. Or, perhaps, on your drive back home from here you will do so. And what will you hear broadcast on that radio?

If your radio is anything like mine is, on any Sunday morning every station seems to broadcast either the services of large church congregations or special evangelistic programs from various parachurch organizations. Most of these feature carefully-prepared sermons by serious and experienced preachers and all of those sermons are

consciously and deliberately grounded in the Scriptures. Surely here, if anywhere, we should be reminded that God is promising us lives that are more in union with Him, not ones that are more independent of our fellows, that He proposes to decrease our dependence on the things of this world, and to attach us more firmly to the next one.

And, indeed, often we will find that in those sermons. Along with the lovely music, the skilled choirs, and the soaring organs, we often hear there the true Christian message of what is really important in God's eyes rather than in our own.

But not always. All too often, there is a truly disturbing undercurrent. With disturbing frequency, we hear what I may call "the Gospel of material salvation".

I am sure you have heard it too. This is that subtly perverted doctrine that starts with the undeniable truth that God always seeks to provide for our needs, material as well as spiritual, because we are, of course, beings with physical bodies as well as spiritual souls. Those bodies must be fed and cared for so our souls will be open to God's words.

That is the point of, for example, Our Lord's parable about the flowers that clothe the fields and the birds of the air that Our Lord always feeds. But then, all too often these Scriptural truths begin to be twisted, ever so gently. Slowly, step by step, it is suggested to us that if God loves us so much that He will feed us, and clothe us, and house us, then the more He loves us, the more of these good things He will provide for us.

If it stopped there, that would be bad enough. But, sadly, it often goes a step further. If God provides for those He loves, and if God provides more for those He loves more, then we can judge how much God loves us by how much He has given us.

Think for a moment about that terrible suggestion: We can judge how much God loves us by looking at how much He has given us. If that were true, it would mean that we could tell how much He loves our

neighbors by looking at how much He has given them. And those to whom He has given much, those would necessarily be the ones whom He loves greatly. And those to whom He has given little, then those would also have to be the ones whom He does not love quite so much.

That pernicious idea is, of course, precisely the opposite of what Our Lord Himself told us in the Sermon on the Mount and elsewhere in the Gospels. He said it is who told us we will meet Him in the persons of the poor, the hungry, the lonely, and the sick^{ix} and that we will be judged by how we have responded to their needs, not by how we have managed to avoid being so needy ourselves.

Conclusion:

There are two great spiritual traps into which we may fall headlong if we permit ourselves to be led down this path toward material salvation – or, perhaps better, of salvation by materials. The first is that if and when we are so fortunate as to accumulate a store of this world’s goods, we may well confuse that accumulation with the ends for which God has permitted us to acquire it.

This is the thought that lies behind Our Lord’s famous injunction that it is easier for a heavily-laden pack camel to squeeze through a shoulder-width alley in the bazaar – the “eye of the needle” – than for a man laden with riches to push his way into the kingdom of heaven.^x It is not that the possession of riches is a positive disqualification from holiness, it is that such possession is, all too often, a fatal distraction from holiness.

Related to this is the second great spiritual trap into which we may fall as we rush down the path toward material goods. This is another part of what we hear, Sunday after Sunday, on our car radios: if we will only go to the preacher’s particular congregation, if we will only send our contributions to the broadcaster’s particular outreach ministry, then God will respond by filling our bread baskets and our bank accounts.

This concept reduces the whole grand Christian enterprise, including Our Lord's almost unimaginable sacrifice for us, to a huge and rather shoddy cargo cult.

I, for one, absolutely and utterly reject this crassly self-serving idea. Janis Joplin's wonderfully parodied of this travesty when she sang, "O Lord, won't you give me a Mercedes Benz". Baruch would have agreed with her; when he urged the Israelites to "Take courage, my children, cry to God, and he will deliver you from the power and hand of the enemy",^{xi} the "enemy" he meant was *not* an empty garage or back-yard tool shed. He meant the enemy who always waits for us to feel sorry for ourselves when our garages or tool sheds are empty, the same enemy who tempted our first parents into placing themselves on the same plane as God.^{xii}

That is the enemy, to deliver us from whose power our Lord spent three tortured hours dying upon the Cross.

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

ⁱⁱ *Baruch 4: 21-30 (KJV).*

ⁱⁱⁱ *Philippians 3: 7-16 (KJV).*

^{iv} *Baruch 4: 21 (RSV).*

^v *A selection from a book, or lection.*

^{vi} *Baruch 4: 21 (RSV).*

^{vii} *Baruch 4: 22 (RSV).*

^{viii} *Baruch 4: 23 (RSV).*

^{ix} *St. Matthew 25: 35-36.*

^x *St. Matthew 19: 24; St. Mark 10: 25.*

^{xi} *Baruch 4: 21 (RSV).*

^{xii} *Genesis 3.*