

**Sermon for Evening Prayer<sup>i</sup>**  
**The Sunday Next Before Advent**  
**(Trinity XXV, 2010)**

**Lessons:**<sup>ii</sup>

**The First Lesson:** Here beginneth the ninth Verse of the eleventh Chapter of Ecclesiastes, or, The Preacher.<sup>iii</sup>

“Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth; and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes: but know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment. Therefore remove sorrow from thy heart, and put away evil from thy flesh: for childhood and youth are vanity.

“Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them; While the sun, or the light, or the moon, or the stars, be not darkened, nor the clouds return after the rain: In the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble, and the strong men shall bow themselves, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those that look out of the windows be darkened, And the doors shall be shut in the streets, when the sound of the grinding is low, and he shall rise up at the voice of the bird, and all the daughters of music shall be brought low; Also when they shall be afraid of that which is high, and fears shall be in the way, and the almond tree shall flourish, and the grasshopper shall be a burden, and desire shall fail: because man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets: Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern. Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.

“Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher; all is vanity....

“Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil. ”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

**The Second Lesson:** Here beginneth the thirteenth Chapter of the Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews.<sup>iv</sup>

“Let brotherly love continue. Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them; and them which suffer adversity, as being yourselves also in the body. Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled: but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge. Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee. So that we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me. Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation. Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever. Be not carried about with divers and strange doctrines. For it is a good thing that the heart be established with grace; not with meats, which have not profited them that have been occupied therein. We have an altar, whereof they have no right to eat which serve the tabernacle. For the bodies of those beasts, whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest for sin, are burned without the camp. Wherefore Jesus also, that he might sanctify the people with his own blood, suffered without the gate. Let us go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach. For here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come. By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name. But to do good and to communicate forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased. Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you. Pray for us: for we trust we have a good conscience, in all things willing to live honestly. But I beseech you the rather to do this, that I may be restored to you the sooner. Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, Make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is wellpleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

## **Text:**

From the Second Lesson: “Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever. Be not carried about with divers and strange doctrines.”<sup>v</sup> In the Name of the Father, and of the ☩ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

## **Homily:**

If you are sitting in a church where this sermon is preached, then you almost certainly are the sort of person who can, with very little difficulty, identify the fallacies in many of the arguments used by those who would foist on you any of various novel versions of the Christian Faith. For example, it is not unlikely these days that someone may tell you that the only reason the New Testament denounces certain sexual perversions is that people in Classical times “did not understand the concept of sexual ‘orientation’” and, if they had understood that, they would have been more “affirming” and “accepting” toward deviant behaviors.

Unless you have a very comprehensive background in ancient history, you may not realize that this argument is factually impossible. That is because the cultures of the ancient world, whether Jewish, Hellenic, Roman, or other, were intimately familiar with every possible sort of sexual expression, combination, or activity. Indeed, virtually all those cultures, with the exception of the Jewish one, tolerated such deviant behavior and any negative regard usually amounted to no more than seeing it as in poor taste or even simply as a good joke.

So, as any history buff can tell you, the notion that only simple ignorance led the first Christians to adopt and carry over Judaism’s denunciations of such practices is itself an outstanding example of simple ignorance.

However, one does not need to be particularly well grounded in any particular field such as history to recognize a second fallacy in the argument I just outlined. When one says that the moral prescriptions that governed life in Old Testament times or in early New Testament times either were not properly imposed back then, or if they were proper

back then but are somehow no longer applicable to us, then one is really saying one of two things: either God Himself changes over time<sup>vi</sup> or, if He does not, then He at least changes His mind even as to things that are certainly fundamental and that, in the nature of the case, most probably must be permanent and unvarying.

Most people understand this instinctively when it is laid out clearly before them and they see two serious implications of it. One of those implications is that if God Himself changes over time, then He did not tell us the truth when He said, “I am the LORD, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed.”<sup>vii</sup> But if God is subject to change, then we cannot rely upon Him, for He may at some time become either unable or at least unwilling to afford us help, support, mercy, or, ultimately, for our salvation. In other words, a God who may change is not, in any real sense, a God.<sup>viii</sup>

The other implication of God’s either changing or at least changing His mind is this. If what is “right” at one time or in one place does not remain “right” in some other time or place, or if what is “wrong” in one time or in one place does not remain “wrong” in some other time or place, then the terms “right” and “wrong” have no essential meaning. If these terms do not refer to some fixed and unvarying standard, then they are no more than labels of convenience, where what we call “right” really means something like “what the powerful people in that situation have decided to do” and “wrong” really means something like “what the powerful people in that situation have decided not to do”.

I noticed this semester after semester during the six or so years I taught Ethics to college students. To a man or a woman, they all walked into the classroom assuming they were moral relativists, that is, adherents of the philosophy that “whatever they do there is O.K. for them”. However, after examining the true implications of such relativism, virtually all of them decided that, indeed, if the notions of “right” and “wrong” are to have any validity or usefulness, then they must, after all, have some permanent content and meaning.

As Christians, this is what we expect to happen because we believe that principles of right and wrong have their origin with God, indeed reflect something of God’s own essence, and that in all important ways

God does not change. As the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews put it with regard to the Second Person of the Trinity, “Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever.”<sup>ix</sup> But that applies with just as much force to the other two Persons of the Trinity, to God the Father and God the Holy Spirit, as well.

Sometimes these deconstructive arguments, which can be summarized in bald English as “God does not know what He is doing”, are couched in more opaque academic language in the hope that their weaknesses may not be quite as obvious as they otherwise would be. In this connection, I am reminded of a dinner conversation I had in 1989 with a young priest. Well, at least he seemed young to me, although he was a grown man, married and with a number of children.

Let us call him Father Doe. He spent four years in the Roman Catholic seminary of a major U.S. city so I asked him how he had come to leave the Roman Church and join ours. He said that one morning in his fourth year in the seminary, during a course in doctrinal theology, the nun who was teaching announced to the class that God’s understanding of us is constantly developing. Parenthetically, that statement was redolent of something called “Process Theology”, which is ultimately traceable to Alfred North Whitehead’s Gifford Lectures of 1927. Since this seminary class must have been around the mid 1970s, my first thought was that the Roman seminaries were apparently running about three decades behind the curve of cutting-edge heretical fads.

But I digress. This assertion, that God’s understanding of us is constantly developing, caused then-Seminarian Doe to raise his hand. “Sister, whatever happened to the concept of the immutable God?” he asked. That afternoon, he was called on the carpet by the Rector of that seminary who dismissed him from the school with the words, “Mr. Doe, we don’t think you are going to be very happy here”.

Rome’s loss was Anglicanism’s gain.

### **Conclusion:**

So far as I am concerned, the result of that incident was a happy one: a well-educated priest who was willing to stand up in the face of

authority and witness for the traditional Catholic Faith. But I still wonder what happened to the other seminarians, the ones who either did not know enough to question the unadulterated hogwash they were being asked to swallow or who knew enough but were too submissive to confront an erring authority figure.

And what of all the faithful church people who may have been misled over the past thirty some years because those seminarians, and their colleagues in other similar institutions, had been indoctrinated in falsehoods? Certainly they, and those seminarians, and that instructor, and that seminary Rector, all would have been much better off, had they only remembered these simple words from the Epistle to the Hebrews: “Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever. Be not carried about with divers and strange doctrines.”<sup>x</sup>

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The Rev'd Canon John A. Hollister<sup>xi</sup>  
November 21, 2010.

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<sup>i</sup> “Any set of Psalms and Lessons appointed for the evening of any day may be read at the morning service, and any set of morning Psalms and Lessons may be read in the evening.” *Concerning the Service of the Church, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER* viii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

<sup>ii</sup> *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER* xli (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

<sup>iii</sup> *Ecclesiastes 11: 9—12: 8, 13-14 (KJV)*.

<sup>iv</sup> *Hebrews 13: 1-21 (KJV)*.

<sup>v</sup> *Hebrews 13: 8-9a (KJV)*.

<sup>vi</sup> R. Hart, *Articles I-VIII: The Catholic Faith, The Anglican Continuum*, Thursday, November 18, 2010. Retrieved from <http://www.anglicancontinuum.blogspot.com>.

<sup>vii</sup> *Malachi 3: 6 (KJV)*.

<sup>viii</sup> Hart, *op. cit.*

<sup>ix</sup> *Hebrews 13: 8 (KJV)*.

<sup>x</sup> *Hebrews 13: 8-9a (KJV)*.

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