

Sermon for Morning Prayer Sexagesima Sunday

Lessons: ⁱ

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the eighth Verse of the thirtieth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. ⁱⁱ

“Now go, write it before them in a table, and note it in a book, that it may be for the time to come for ever and ever: That this is a rebellious people, lying children, children that will not hear the law of the LORD: Which say to the seers, See not; and to the prophets, Prophecy not unto us right things, speak unto us smooth things, prophesy deceits: Get you out of the way, turn aside out of the path, cause the Holy One of Israel to cease from before us. Wherefore thus saith the Holy One of Israel, Because ye despise this word, and trust in oppression and perverseness, and stay thereon: Therefore this iniquity shall be to you as a breach ready to fall, swelling out in a high wall, whose breaking cometh suddenly at an instant. And he shall break it as the breaking of the potter’s vessel that is broken in pieces; he shall not spare: so that there shall not be found in the bursting of it a sherd [**SHARD**] to take fire from the hearth, or to take water withal out of the pit. For thus saith the Lord GOD, the Holy One of Israel; In returning and rest shall ye be saved; in quietness and in confidence shall be your strength: and ye would not. But ye said, No; for we will flee upon horses; therefore shall ye flee: and, We will ride upon the swift; therefore shall they that pursue you be swift. One thousand shall flee at the rebuke of one; at the rebuke of five shall ye flee: till ye be left as a beacon upon the top of a mountain, and as an ensign on an hill.

“And therefore will the LORD wait, that he may be gracious unto you, and therefore will he be exalted, that he may have mercy upon you: for the LORD is a God of judgment: blessed are all they that wait for him. For the people shall dwell in Zion at Jerusalem: thou shalt weep no more: he will be very gracious unto thee at the voice of thy cry; when he shall hear it, he will answer thee. And though the Lord give you the bread of adversity, and the water of affliction, yet shall not thy teachers be removed into a corner any more, but thine eyes shall see thy teachers: And thine ears shall hear a word behind thee, saying, This is the way, walk ye in it, when ye turn to the right hand, and when ye turn to the left.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the twenty-sixth Verse of the fourth Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Mark.ⁱⁱⁱ

“And he said, So is the kingdom of God, as if a man should cast seed into the ground; And should sleep, and rise night and day, and the seed should spring and grow up, he knoweth not how. For the earth bringeth forth fruit of herself; first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear. But when the fruit is brought forth, immediately he putteth in the sickle, because the harvest is come.

“And he said, Whereunto shall we liken the kingdom of God? or with what comparison shall we compare it? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when it is sown in the earth, is less than all the seeds that be in the earth: But when it is sown, it groweth up, and becometh greater than all herbs, and shooteth out great branches; so that the fowls of the air may lodge under the shadow of it. And with many such parables spake he the word unto them, as they were able to hear it. But without a parable spake he not unto them: and when they were alone, he expounded all things to his disciples.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the First Lesson:

“Therefore the Lord waits to be gracious to you;
Therefore he exalts himself to show mercy to you.
For the Lord is a God of justice;
blessed are all those who wait for him.”^{iv}

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

Homily:

When we hear the word “Judgement”, particularly when we hear it in the Church, it conjures up all sorts of images of a gloomy, depressing proceeding during which we will undoubtedly be scared almost out of our newly-resurrected skins because our futures – our futures for all eternity – hang on its outcome.

I do not mean to belittle the importance of this Judgement, nor to suggest that we should not take it extremely seriously. On the contrary, the Church has always taught that Judgement is one of the four things of which Christians must always be mindful. These are the traditional “Four Last Things”, and are Death, Judgement, Heaven, and Hell. We hear less about them than was once customary, just as we hear less and less about uncomfortable topics such as Sin, but the weakness and insecurity of the preachers does not make these matters any less urgent than they ever were.

However, it is too easy to dismiss the true nature of God’s Judgement by confusing it with something like the ancient Egyptian Anubis, the jackal-headed god who took a pair of scales and weighed the heart of each deceased person, the heart on one pan of his scales and a feather on the other. If the nearly weightless feather held its own against the muscular heart, the deceased Egyptian was safe. If, however, his or her misdeeds caused the heart to weigh down the scales, lifting up the feather, the Egyptian was destined for a very uncomfortable time in the afterlife.

In Death and Judgement, as in so many other things, the Judeo-Christian tradition actually takes a subtly different tack than did most of the civilizations of the ancient Near East. Certainly by the time Christianity developed out of Judaism, it was understood that even a nominal Christian might fall so short of his or her vocation as to be lost for eternity. However, as Isaiah told the ancient Israelites, when the Judeo-Christian God judges us, He does so not primarily as a means of casting us away from him or of otherwise punishing us. Instead, that Judgement is a part of His continuous care for us as His chosen people.

Loving parents often must judge their children, but they do not do so in order to find an excuse for punishing those children; they do so in order to assess the children’s state and to correct anything that may be wrong. The parents are motivated by love and, out of that love, hope to be able to guide their children to overcome their weaknesses and to progress toward becoming better and happier persons.

So, too, does God judge us in order to be a loving, gracious, and merciful Father to us. Sadly, sometimes a child has grown to be so out of control that a parent cannot manage to correct him; when that happens, sometimes all the parent can do is to turn that child loose to live and learn on his own. I once knew a man who was forced to do just that. He had a son who simply would pay no attention to

his parents, would not make the slightest effort to listen to them or to cooperate with them, and so, in utter frustration, when that boy reached eighteen, his father drove him outside town to the nearest Interstate Highway onramp.

He reached into his pocket, took out all the money he had on him, and split it, keeping half and giving half to the boy, then told the boy he was on his own.

Many years after that parting by the highway, that son told me his father's action saved him from a very unhappy life of useless and unproductive conflict with society. He indicated pretty clearly that, at the time, he did not appreciate the involuntary lesson his father's "tough love" gave him, and apparently it took a good many years and even more hard knocks before this young man learned that the world was just not prepared to put up with his self-centered attitude, but eventually he did learn that. Long after the fact, he was grateful that his parents loved him enough to have made him learn it.

So Isaiah tells us not to despair of God's Judgement but to wait upon God and upon the final outcome of His plans for us.

Conclusion:

As St. Mark reports Our Lord as telling His followers: "[T]he kingdom of God ... is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."^v In other words, the ministry of Jesus, which is symbolized by the seed, will in the fullness of time sprout and grow into a mighty tree, which will be the kingdom of God.

In this way, at the very same time in which God sends His Son to call us to repentance in order to prepare us for the Judgement, He is also laying the basis for our salvation despite that Judgement. In this way, He fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah, that the Lord waits to be gracious to us, he exalts himself to show mercy to us, for He is a God of justice, and blessed are all those who wait for Him.^{vi}

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

ⁱⁱ *Isaiah 30:8-21 (KJV).*

ⁱⁱⁱ *St. Mark 4: 26-34 (KJV).*

^{iv} *Isaiah 30: 18 (RSV).*

^v *St. Mark 4: 30-32 (RSV).*

^{vi} *Isaiah 30: 18 (RSV).*

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