

Sermon for Morning Prayer The Second Sunday after Trinity

Lessons:

The First Lesson: here beginneth the thirteenth Verse of the thirty-first Chapter of the Book of Job.

“... If I did despise the cause of my manservant or of my maidservant, when they contended with me; What then shall I do when God riseth up? and when he visiteth, what shall I answer him? Did not he that made me in the womb make him? and did not one fashion us in the womb? If I have withheld the poor from their desire, or have caused the eyes of the widow to fail; Or have eaten my morsel myself alone, and the fatherless hath not eaten thereof; (For from my youth he was brought up with me, as with a father, and I have guided her from my mother’s womb;) If I have seen any perish for want of clothing, or any poor without covering; If his loins have not blessed me, and if he were not warmed with the fleece of my sheep; If I have lifted up my hand against the fatherless, when I saw my help in the gate: Then let mine arm fall from my shoulder blade, and mine arm be broken from the bone. For destruction from God was a terror to me, and by reason of his highness I could not endure. If I have made gold my hope, or have said to the fine gold, Thou art my confidence; If I rejoiced because my wealth was great, and because mine hand had gotten much; If I beheld the sun when it shined, or the moon walking in brightness; And my heart hath been secretly enticed, or my mouth hath kissed my hand: This also were an iniquity to be punished by the judge: for I should have denied the God that is above.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the thirteenth Chapter of the First Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians.

“Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be

burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing. Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the First Lesson: “This also were an iniquity to be punished by the judge: for I should have denied the God that is above.” In the Name of the Father, and of the † Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Introduction:

When I was in high school, I once sat down to read the entire Bible, beginning at Genesis and ending with Revelation. It was a long and wearisome process, not one I would recommend to anyone else and not one I would repeat myself, but it impressed me with one great lesson. That was that the Old Testament, taken as a whole, can be viewed in essence as the account of the ancient Hebrews’ repeatedly falling away from their Covenant with God, usually by falling into the outright paganism of the peoples who lived around them.

Then after each such instance of apostasy, a patient God – that’s “God” with a capital “G”, the One, True God with whom they had that Covenant – would send another great prophet to recall them to the true, monotheistic religion. It was rather like a grand version of the afternoon television “soap operas” that my grandmother and great aunt watched in those days. If the Old Testament had been turned into a

screenplay, perhaps it could have been titled something like “The Young and the Reckless”.

Much as were the ancient Israelites, we live in a society in which we are surrounded by neo-pagans. Our neighbors have been seduced by “magic” crystals and other implements of the so-called “New Age”, media celebrities promote the false doctrines of Scientology, and our political leaders urge us to murder our nation’s babies on the false altars of the abortionists.

Theme:

So it should be no surprise to us that we, ourselves, tend to fall into just the sorts of self-absorbed misconduct that the ancient Jews found so difficult to avoid. So, too, we can profitably pay close attention to Job’s recitation of the evil behaviors that frequently beset his time and culture. He begins with two of the most common errors to which the affluent, comfortable members of any society are prone, errors in their manner of dealing with those less fortunate than themselves. Then he notes two further errors that typically follow on to the first two, errors regarding the true source of that wealth and comfort.

Development:

- 1. Job recognizes that “servants” – in his day, actually slaves – have rights just as do free men, rights that result from their birth, that is, are gifts from God, not gifts from their masters.**

To convince his weak friends that his misfortunes are not punishments meted out to him by God, Job lists the matters in which he feels he has not dealt wrongly, that is, the matters which should *not* have caused God to afflict him. Significantly, he begins with how he has treated the weakest members of his society, those least able to protect themselves from exploitation and harm:

“If I have rejected the cause of my manservant or my maidservant,
when they brought a complaint against me;
what then shall I do when God rises up?
When he makes inquiry, what shall I answer him?
Did not he who made me in the womb make him?
And did not one fashion us in the womb?”

This is an early recognition of the fundamental ethical principle that Our Lord would later elaborate in, for example, the Parable of the Good Samaritan. This principle, of course, is that all human beings are our “neighbors”, that is, are persons who have, in God’s eyes, the same intrinsic value as do we ourselves.

2. For Job, those on whom God has bestowed material wealth have a consequent responsibility toward the entire community.

If we accept the truth that lies behind the Creation account in Genesis, we must also accept that God entrusted us with stewardship over the created order. From that, in turn, we must then accept that this stewardship imposes on us certain responsibilities and obligations, including obligations for the proper use of that with which we have been entrusted:

“If I have withheld anything that the poor desired,
 or have caused the eyes of the widow to fail,
 or have eaten my morsel alone,
 and the fatherless has not eaten of it
 (for from his youth I reared him as a father,
 and from his mother’s womb I guided him);
 if I have seen any one perish for lack of clothing,
 or a poor man without covering;
 if his loins have not blessed me;
 and if he was not warmed with the fleece of my sheep;
 if I have raised my hand against the fatherless,
 because I saw help in the gate;
 then let my shoulder blade fall from my shoulder,
 and let my arm be broken from its socket.
 For I was in terror of calamity from God,
 and I could not have faced his majesty.”

Job recognizes that, as a consequence both of the essential fellowship of all persons as God’s creatures and of that stewardship over God’s creation, God will judge us, at least in part, by how we have dealt with those less fortunate than we are. To put this another way, God will take heed of how we have used the blessings He has given us: have we used them to help others whom He also loves, or have we used them entirely selfishly?

This is a striking precursor of Our Lord's allocution to His disciples on the Mount of Olives, where He pictures men standing before the judgement seat and how those who have been generous will be told, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me." Similarly, those who have ignored the needy will be told, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me."

3. Job knows better than to put his trust in material wealth, which is a form of idolatry.

Job acknowledges that those who have been favored with the good things of this world have an obligation to use those things well and wisely so long as they have them. However, he does not fall into the error of assuming that just because one has once acquired wealth and material possessions, one is thereby either entitled or guaranteed to continue in their enjoyment:

“If I have made gold my trust, or called fine gold my confidence;
if I have rejoiced because my wealth was great,
or because my hand had gotten much;

. . .

this also would be an iniquity to be punished by the judges,
for I would have been false to God above.”

Indeed, if there is any one lesson that can readily be drawn from the Book of Job, it is that family, friends, health, and wealth are all fleeting, indeed, are so evanescent that what we enjoy at daybreak may have been lost to us by sunset.

The only permanent source of good in our lives is the God whom Job continually praises, even in the depth of his miseries. Thus, as Job acknowledges, to place any faith in material objects rather than in that God is an insidious and seductive form of idolatry.

4. Job recognizes and eschews the temptations toward idolatry and nature worship that always beset an agricultural society.

Job says:

“if I have looked at the sun when it shone,
 or the moon moving in splendor,
 and my heart has been secretly enticed,
 and my mouth has kissed my hand;
 this also would be an iniquity to be punished by the judges,
 for I would have been false to God above.”

This refers to the ancients’ custom of “throwing a kiss” – we might say “blowing a kiss” – to the heavenly bodies. This was a worshipper’s gesture of adoration of those bodies, just as though that worshipper had kissed an idol, only he could not reach far enough actually to kiss the moon, planets, or stars.

In almost all pagan pantheons, the stars and planets, which seem to govern the rhythm of the seasons, were regarded as deities. Thus this gesture, which was as common in Job’s day as crossing oneself is in ours, was actually a form of worship of the pagan nature gods. As such, it was utterly anathema to the pious Jews who included Job’s writings among their Scriptures.

Of course, every society has its own characteristic ways of luring its members into paganism and idolatry. Job lived in an agricultural society in which natural forces seemed to govern each person’s everyday life. Most of us live at a much greater remove from the realities of planting, growing, and harvesting crops or tending flocks of herding animals for our sustenance. We are offered abstract images on television and in magazines to attract us into large stores to buy produce, meat, and other products which have already been processed to the point where their origins in or on the soil of the earth seem almost abstractions themselves.

So to us, unlike to Job’s neighbors, the lures of the occult come in similarly abstract form. We are offered new and false religions, such as Scientology, or old and false religions wrapped up in new “environmentally friendly” packaging such as witchcraft and other forms of nature worship. In one way, however, we are the same as Job’s contemporaries: that is that these influences, subtle as they are, are still designed to seduce us away from the recognition and worship of the true God and into recognition and worship of false gods.

Conclusion:

There is a connection between the four issues on which Job concentrates in today's First Lesson. It is simply that we must keep firmly in mind that it is God's love for all men and women that gives all humans their intrinsic worth. They are valuable precisely because God finds them worth loving and this is our own security as well as that of each other individual. If we wish to protect our own personal integrity and value, we must protect that of every other person as well.

However, in so protecting others, out of the recognition that they are God's people and are beloved by God, we are simultaneously recognizing the reality and sovereignty of that God. The constant reaffirmation of this recognition is one of our greatest protections against falling into the other errors to which Job points. So long as we hold God as sovereign over us, we will be less likely to think that our wellbeing comes to us from our own deserts, just as we will be less likely to replace that one sovereign God with other forces, spirits, or gods.

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

2 Job 31:13-28 (KJV).

3 I Corinthians 13:1-13 (KJV).

4 Job 31:28 (KJV).

5 Job 31:13-15 (RSV).

6 St. Luke 10:29-37.

7 Genesis 1:28-30.

8 I.e., "If I have not been so generous to him that future generations of his family will not thank me as their savior."

9 The gate of the city was the accustomed meeting place of the "solid citizens", where business was conducted publicly, cf., e.g., Ruth 4:1-12.

Therefore, this may refer to the ways wealth and position – such as the well to do citizen's daily assembly with other "movers and shakers" at the gate -- can be misused to oppress or dispossess poorer and less powerful and to gain the acquiescence of other rich and powerful men in

those injustices. Cf. 1 Kings 21:1-19.

10 In other words, “may I lose the use of the arm on which I depend to get and defend my living”.

11 Job 31:16-23 (RSV).

12 St. Matthew 25:40b (RSV).

13 St. Matthew 25:45b (RSV).

14 Job 31:24-25, 28 (RSV).

15 Job 31:22-28 (RSV).

16 E.S.P. Heavenor, Job, in D. GUTHRIE AND J. A. MOTYER, EDS., THE NEW BIBLE COMMENTARY: REVISED, 3rd ed. 437 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1970).

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