

## Sermon for Morning Prayer The Third Sunday in Advent

### Lessons:<sup>1</sup>

**The First Lesson:** Here beginneth the twenty-fifth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.<sup>2</sup>

“O LORD, thou art my God; I will exalt thee, I will praise thy name; for thou hast done wonderful things; thy counsels of old are faithfulness and truth. For thou hast made of a city an heap; of a defenced city a ruin: a palace of strangers to be no city; it shall never be built. Therefore shall the strong people glorify thee, the city of the terrible nations shall fear thee. For thou hast been a strength to the poor, a strength to the needy in his distress, a refuge from the storm, a shadow from the heat, when the blast of the terrible ones is as a storm against the wall. Thou shalt bring down the noise of strangers, as the heat in a dry place; even the heat with the shadow of a cloud: the branch of the terrible ones shall be brought low.

“And in this mountain shall the LORD of hosts make unto all people a feast of fat things, a feast of wines on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wines on the lees well refined. And he will destroy in this mountain the face of the covering cast over all people, and the vail that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death in victory; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from off all faces; and the rebuke of his people shall he take away from off all the earth: for the LORD hath spoken it.

“And it shall be said in that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, and he will save us: this is the LORD; we have waited for him, we will be glad and rejoice in his salvation.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

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<sup>1</sup> *An Alternative Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised in 1928)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER, WITH THE ADDITIONS AND DEVIATIONS PROPOSED IN 1928 31 (Canterbury Press 2008); *The Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised In 1928)*, A BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxii (South Africa 1954); *A Table of Lessons (authorized by the Episcopal Synod)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xx (CIPBC 1963).

<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 25: 1-9 (KJV).

<sup>3</sup> 1 Timothy 1: 12—2: 7 (KJV).

<sup>4</sup> 1 Timothy 1: 19b-20 (RSV).

<sup>5</sup> St. Matthew 28: 19-20 (RSV).

<sup>6</sup> *The Order for the Administration of the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion*, in A BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 238-39 (South Africa 1954); *The Order for the Administration of the Lord's Supper The Order of 1960*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 366-67 (CIPBC 1963). Cf. the traditional wording, which is to the same effect, in *The Order for the Administration of the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion* and *An Alternative Order for the Administration of the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER, WITH THE ADDITIONS AND DEVIATIONS PROPOSED IN 1928 317 & 334 (Canterbury Press 2008).

<sup>7</sup> A BCP 238-39 (South Africa 1954) (emphasis supplied). THE BCP 366-67 (India 1963) alters this to “this is my Blood of the New Covenant...”

<sup>8</sup> This is one of the insidious distortions of truth that are contained in the ICEL's English “translation” of the Roman *Novus Ordo Missae*, which Pope Benedict XVI is in the process of suppressing. Here, the ICEL inserted in place of authentic Catholic teaching a bald statement of the heresy of universalism: “for you and for all”.

<sup>9</sup> St. Matthew 13: 3-9; St. Mark 4: 1-9, 14-20; St. Luke 8: 5-8, 11-15.

<sup>10</sup> 1 Corinthians 5: 1-13.

<sup>11</sup> Priest Assistant, Christ Anglican Catholic Church, Metairie LA; Honorary Canon, the Diocese of the Resurrection; Honorary Canon and Canon to the Ordinary, The Diocese of New Orleans, The Anglican Catholic Church.

**The Second Lesson:** Here beginneth the twelfth Verse of the first Chapter of the First Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to Timothy.<sup>3</sup>

“... And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who hath enabled me, for that he counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry; Who was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious: but I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. And the grace of our Lord was exceeding abundant with faith and love which is in Christ Jesus. This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief. Howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might shew **[SHOW]** forth all longsuffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting. Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen. This charge I commit unto thee, son Timothy, according to the prophecies which went before on thee, that thou by them mightest war a good warfare; Holding faith, and a good conscience; which some having put away concerning faith have made shipwreck: Of whom is Hymenaeus **[high-menn-EE-uss]** and Alexander; whom I have delivered unto Satan, that they may learn not to blaspheme.

“I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; For kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour; Who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus; Who gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time. Whereunto I am ordained a preacher, and an apostle, (I speak the truth in Christ, and lie not;) a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and verity.”

his acquiescence in their departing from it as delivering them to Satan. That is the same turn of phrase he used when he directed the church in Corinth to separate itself from the man who obstinately continued living in incest with a concubine,<sup>10</sup> so his use of it to St. Timothy carries that same implication of active misbehavior.

### **Conclusion:**

However, seldom as it is that any congregation must deal with open incest or adultery, it is all too frequent that it must cope with the sort of subtly destructive members I described earlier. And St. Paul’s words apply just as much to these low-profile problems, whom we may call “emotional subversives”, as they do to tabloid-style moral scandals.

Once a person has demonstrated a contumacious propensity for damaging the Church and undermining either the morals or the faith of its members, and that person refuses to repent of his or her errors, then the Church must do what a conscientious physician does with a highly infectious patient. For the health of the larger number, the source of the infection must be quarantined.

In the case of the Church, such a quarantine means that the person concerned must be allowed to take himself or herself off, indeed sometimes must be encouraged to do so, despite our very natural regret at that necessity. Indeed, we will often feel that necessity as a failure on our own part but we must still act for the health of the Church and especially without regard to how long or devoted the erring person’s service and contributions to the Church may have seemed.

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The Rev’d Canon John A. Hollister<sup>11</sup>  
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More insidious, however, are those of the rocky soil whose general manner of life does not openly contravene Christian teachings. Indeed, many of these appear, on superficial inspection, to be committed and active members of the Church, participating in its outward activities, giving to it financially, and not infrequently even holding offices or leadership positions within it.

Usually, it is only slowly that we begin to suspect that a particular member of the Church may actually belong to this group. We get hints from his or her attitude, which is usually highly negative. Sometimes this person finds reasons to question every proposal or initiative that threatens to make the Church more accessible to the community, that is, more open to those who most need its love and care; sometimes he or she actively opposes or even obstructs, sometimes actually sabotages, efforts at outreach, community service, and real church growth.

This sort of bitterness, inward-looking, and exclusivity discourages visitors and inquirers. So when these subversive characters finally work themselves into a dudgeon and leaves, as they almost always do sooner or later, we often find that they were a principal cause of their congregations' failure to thrive. When in their absence we start to see new signs of growth, we then realize how very destructive their influence has been.

And there is not a single congregation of the Church with which I have been familiar over nearly thirty years that has not, at some time, harbored at least one such person. Indeed, I suspect that each person who may hear this sermon could recall at least one of them for himself or herself.

I also suspect that the two men whom St. Paul was discussing with his deputy, St. Timothy, fell into the class of those who scandalize the Church by living in open and notorious defiance of its principles. This is because he described

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

### Text:

From the Second Lesson: "By rejecting conscience, certain persons have made shipwreck of their faith, among them Hymenaeus [**high-menn-EE-uss**] and Alexander; whom I have delivered to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme."<sup>4</sup> In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

### Homily:

The primary mission of the Church is to gather into the body of Christ all the men and women of the world. Thus it was that Our Lord's final command on earth to His Apostles was, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age."<sup>5</sup> In other words, we are commanded to go out and try to bring *every single* living man and woman into the household of the Faith.

However, a moment's look around us, followed by a short reflection, will show us that this worthy, and indeed divine, objective is actually an *aspiration*, set before us as an inspiration for our efforts, and not a *prediction* as to the outcome of those efforts. In other words, we can readily determine that every single person now living will not, in fact, do what is necessary on his or her part for him or her actually to be saved.

To put this in slightly more technical language, Christ died to make it *possible* for all mankind to be saved; He did not die to make it *certain* that all would be. That His death on the Cross fulfilled all external or third-person requirements for salvation is attested to by the Words of Institution

of the Eucharist, which are contained within the Canon of Consecration<sup>6</sup> in our Prayer Books: “[F]or that thou of thy tender mercy didst give thine only Son Jesus Christ to take our nature upon him, and to suffer death upon the Cross for our redemption; who (by his one oblation of himself once offered) made a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world....”

Thus there can be no doubt for the believing Christian that Our Lord did all that was necessary, upon God’s part, to offer the gift of salvation to each and every person. However, the same source, only a few lines later, attests that not all people will accept that offer. Thus the institution of the most central act of Christian worship is described in these words: “[T]his is my Blood of the New Testament, which is shed for you *and for many* for the remission of sins....”<sup>7</sup>

Those words, “for many”, come to us as a translation of the Latin “et pro multos”.<sup>8</sup> They make it clear that, in the end, not all will be saved. And there are essentially two classes or groups of persons to whom this applies.

The first such group is composed of those to whom the Gospel has not come in a form that they can grasp. This is our failure, not theirs, for by not reaching them with the Living Word, we have fallen short of Our Lord’s commission to go and make them His disciples of them. The second such group is composed of those who have heard the Gospel and have had the opportunity to be converted by it but who have failed to let it into their hearts and to follow its dictates. These are the ones Our Lord characterized as rocky ground in His parable of the sower.<sup>9</sup>

You will recall that Our Lord did not say that all the sower’s seed thrown upon rocky ground is destined never to sprout. What He said was that even when it sprouts there, will not be firmly rooted, so they will wither and die. And it

seems to me that there are two types of this rocky ground which differ each from the other not qualitatively, because both are stony, but quantitative, that is, in how long they support what appear to be flourishing plants before those plants give up the struggle and die.

Sometimes the soil is so thin and infertile that no sprouts ever appear. These are those who hear the Gospel and simply to not permit it to enter their hearts at all. Many others, however, seem to hear the Gospel and let it into their lives but who do not allow it to penetrate all the corners of their beings, so that they are not truly converted by it, even though they often give all the outward appearances of being good and pious Christians.

As Queen Elizabeth I said, we are not given windows into the souls of men and women so that we can see what truly goes on in there. However, we are given eyes that work, so we may sometimes observe the outward behavior of those men and women and so draw prudent conclusions about how their interior lives are reflected in their actions which is what the King James Bible and the Prayer Book call their “conversation”.

We all have known someone who has been a member of the Church but who has allowed the sinful affections of the world, the flesh, and the devil to lure them away from living the Christian life and following the Christian path. When they openly and notoriously cease walking the path that leads to Christ, then obviously they cease making progress toward fellowship with Him, which in the end is what salvation actually means.

For these unfortunates, we must always pray, praying for their conversion and repentance, and supporting our prayers with whatever practical witness and remonstrances of which we are capable.