

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER
The Second Sunday after the Epiphany¹

Lessons:²

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the forty-ninth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.³

“Listen, O isles, unto me; and hearken, ye people, from far; The LORD hath called me from the womb; from the bowels of my mother hath he made mention of my name. And he hath made my mouth like a sharp sword; in the shadow of his hand hath he hid me, and made me a polished shaft; in his quiver hath he hid me; And said unto me, Thou art my servant, O Israel, in whom I will be glorified. Then I said, I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for nought, and in vain: yet surely my judgment is with the LORD, and my work with my God.

“And now, saith [**SETH**] the LORD that formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob again to him, Though Israel be not gathered, yet shall I be glorious in the eyes of the LORD, and my God shall be my strength. And he said, It is a light thing that thou shouldest be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel: I will also give thee for a light to the Gentiles, that thou mayest be my salvation unto the end of the earth. Thus saith [**SETH**] the LORD, the Redeemer of Israel, and his Holy One, to him whom man despiseth, to him whom the nation abhorreth, to a servant of rulers, Kings shall see and arise, princes also shall worship, because of the LORD that is faithful, and the Holy One of Israel, and he shall choose thee. Thus saith [**SETH**] the LORD, In an acceptable time have I heard thee, and in a day of salvation have I helped thee: and I will preserve thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people, to establish the earth, to cause to inherit the desolate heritages; That thou mayest say to the prisoners, Go forth; to them that are in darkness, Shew [**SHOW**] yourselves. They shall feed in the ways, and their pastures shall be in all high places. They shall not hunger nor thirst; neither shall the

heat nor sun smite them: for he that hath mercy on them shall lead them, even by the springs of water shall he guide them. And I will make all my mountains a way, and my highways shall be exalted. Behold, these shall come from far: and, lo, these from the north and from the west; and these from the land of Sinim [**SIGH-nimm**].

“Sing, O heavens; and be joyful, O earth; and break forth into singing, O mountains: for the LORD hath comforted his people, and will have mercy upon his afflicted.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the first Chapter of the General Epistle of James.⁴

“James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, to the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad, greeting. My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations; Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience. But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing. If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him. But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed. For let not that man think that he shall receive any thing of the Lord. A double minded man is unstable in all his ways. Let the brother of low degree rejoice in that he is exalted: But the rich, in that he is made low: because as the flower of the grass he shall pass away. For the sun is no sooner risen with a burning heat, but it withereth the grass, and the flower thereof falleth, and the grace of the fashion of it perisheth: so also shall the rich man fade away in his ways. Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him. Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man: But every man is tempted,

⁴ James 1:1-27 (KJV).

⁵ St. Mark 8:29-30 (KJV); *cf.* St. Luke 9:21.

⁶ Deuteronomy 32:4 (KJV).

⁷ Psalm 119:68 (KJV).

⁸ Psalm 33:5 (KJV & MCV).

⁹ Bishop Thomas Ken, 1674, in his pair of hymns for Morning and Evening Prayer: “Awake, my soul, and with the sun” and “Glory to thee, my God, this night”.

¹⁰ When ordered by King Charles II to house the King’s mistress, Nell Gwynne, Ken had the roof of his house removed so that she had to lodge elsewhere. Rather than holding a grudge, the Merrie Monarch respected Ken’s adherence to his principles and, in one of his last acts, appointed him Bishop of Bath and Wells.

¹¹ Logicians would regard this as the *ad hominem* fallacy.

¹² St. Matthew 19:17 (KJV); *see also* St. Mark 10:18 & St. Luke 18:19.

¹³ St. Matthew 22:1-14.

¹⁴ St. Matthew 25:31-46.

¹⁵ St. Mark 8:29-30 (KJV); *cf.* St. Luke 9:21.

¹⁶ Hebrews 13:8 (KJV).

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conclusion is clear: “God is always good and is always the source of all goodness, and can never be anything else.”

Conclusion:

One obvious implication of this is that we should always be giving thanks to God for all that He has showered upon us. It is good for the soul occasionally to reread the General Thanksgiving that is found in the Book of Common Prayer at the end of the Offices of Morning and Evening Prayer; this is about as compact and comprehensive a statement of our reasons for gratitude as it is possible to find anywhere.

Another obvious implication is that when we are tempted to something that is evil, that temptation does not come from God; therefore, it must come from some other place and, indeed, from some place that does not have our welfare at heart.

Remember the conclusion of our syllogism: “God is always good and is always the source of all goodness, and can never be anything else.”

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May 2, 2010

¹ This sermon was originally written on the Epistle for Mass on the Fourth Sunday after Easter, 2010.

² *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 32 (Canterbury Press 2008); *The Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised In 1928)*, A BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxiv (South Africa 1954); *A Table of Lessons (authorized by the Episcopal Synod)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxii (CIPBC 1963).

³ Isaiah 49:1-13 (KJV).

when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death. Do not err, my beloved brethren. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning. Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures. Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God. Wherefore lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness, and receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save your souls. But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves. For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass: For he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was. But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed. If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain. Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Epistle: “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.”⁵ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Introduction:

In the first Chapter of Genesis, in the description of the process by which God created the universe, we are told that He looked upon His handiwork and found it to be *good*. Thus one of the essential attributes of God's created order is that it is, in its inherent nature, *good*.

Theme:

Nor should this be any surprise to us. Certainly there are misfortunes that inevitably attend upon our state of life, as physical beings in a physical universe, and as intelligent beings endowed with both ratiocination and free will, but these are incidents of the type of life God designed for us; they are not the essence of that life.

Development:

God Himself is *good*—in fact, is the source of all goodness—, as we are told in Deuteronomy: “He is the Rock, his work is perfect.”⁶ So, too, then, if He is good, His work must necessarily also be *good*; as the Psalmist says, “Thou art good, and doest good.”⁷ From this, it follows that the things that are of God are good things: “The earth is full of the goodness of the LORD.”⁸ This insight is summed up in the words of the old hymn, “Praise God, from whom all blessings flow.”⁹

Incidentally, that line was penned by Thomas Ken, the saintly¹⁰ Nonjuring Bishop. If the legitimacy of the sentiment could be judged by its utterer's overall beliefs¹¹ and his consistency in upholding them, then Ken's reverence for the received and unbroken tradition of the Apostles is evidenced by the declaration he made during his last illness: “I am dying in the Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Faith professed by the whole Church before the disunion of East and West; and, more particularly, in the Communion of the

Church of England, as it stands distinguished from both Papal and Protestant innovation, and adheres to the Doctrine of the Cross.”

Moreover, not only is God the source of all goodness, He is its exclusive source. As Our Lord told His followers, “Why callest thou me good? there is none good but one, that is God.”¹² Thus there is a high probability, if not indeed a certainty, that things that do not come from Him are also not good. In fact, in the same way that “cold” is not a thing but the absence of a thing, namely heat, so “evil” is not in and of itself a thing but, instead, is the absence of good.

To put the matter another way, evil is simply the absence of the God Who is the source of all goodness. That is why the one thing we know with certainty about the ultimate evil, that is Hell, is that it is eternal existence separated from, that is in the absence of, God.

This we are taught by the parable of the marriage feast, which is a metaphor for the Kingdom of Heaven, from which the unprepared guest was cast out from the king's fellowship.¹³ Even more pointed is the parable of the sheep and the goats,¹⁴ in which the sheep are divided from the flock to join forever in the shepherd's fellowship while the goats are divided from the same flock to be sent into permanent exile from the shepherd and the sheep.

Remember our text for this sermon: “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.”¹⁵ A similar sentiment is expressed in Hebrews: “Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever.”¹⁶

Think of this as the major premise of a syllogism: “God never changes.” Then think of the minor premise that “God is good and is the source of all goodness.” Then the