
SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER
The Third Sunday after the Epiphany¹
(Year II)

The Rev. Warren E. Shaw,² Supply Priest

Lessons:³

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the sixth Verse of the fifth Chapter of Amos.⁴

“... Seek the LORD, and ye shall live; lest he break out like fire in the house of Joseph, and devour it, and there be none to quench it in Beth-el [**BETH-ull**]. Ye who turn judgment to wormwood, and leave off righteousness in the earth, Seek him that maketh the seven stars and Orion, and turneth the shadow of death into the morning, and maketh the day dark with night: that calleth for the waters of the sea, and poureth them out upon the face of the earth: The LORD is his name: That strengtheneth the spoiled against the strong, so that the spoiled shall come against the fortress. They hate him that rebuketh in the gate, and they abhor him that speaketh uprightly. Forasmuch therefore as your treading is upon the poor, and ye take from him burdens of wheat: ye have built houses of hewn stone, but ye shall not dwell in them; ye have planted pleasant vineyards, but ye shall not drink wine of them. For I know your manifold transgressions and your mighty sins: they afflict the just, they take a bribe, and they turn aside the poor in the gate from their right. Therefore the prudent shall keep silence in that time; for it is an evil time. Seek good, and not evil, that ye may live: and so the LORD, the God of hosts, shall be with you, as ye have spoken. Hate the evil, and love the good, and establish judgment in the gate: it may be that the LORD God of hosts will be gracious unto the remnant of Joseph. Therefore the LORD, the God of hosts, the Lord, saith [**SETH**] thus; Wailing shall be in all streets; and they shall say in all the highways, Alas! alas! and they shall call the husbandman to mourning, and such as are skilful of lamentation to wailing. And in all vineyards shall be wailing: for I will pass through thee, saith [**SETH**] the LORD.

¹ This sermon was originally written on the Gospel for Holy Communion according to Proper 14B, according to the Lectionary of the 1979 Book of Common Prayer.

² Retired Rector, St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Chester, PA.

³ *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 33 (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).

⁴ Amos 5:6-24 (KJV).

⁵ St. John 6:41-end (KJV).

⁶ St. John 6:41 (RSV).

Woe unto you that desire the day of the LORD! to what end is it for you? the day of the LORD is darkness, and not light. As if a man did flee from a lion, and a bear met him; or went into the house, and leaned his hand on the wall, and a serpent bit him. Shall not the day of the LORD be darkness, and not light? even very dark, and no brightness in it?

“I hate, I despise your feast days, and I will not smell in your solemn assemblies. Though ye offer me burnt offerings and your meat offerings, I will not accept them: neither will I regard the peace offerings of your fat beasts. Take thou away from me the noise of thy songs; for I will not hear the melody of thy viols. But let judgment run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the forty-first Verse of the sixth Chapter of the Gospel according to St. John.⁵

“... The Jews then murmured at him, because he said, I am the bread which came down from heaven. And they said, Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? how is it then that he saith [SETH], I came down from heaven? Jesus therefore answered and said unto them, Murmur not among yourselves. No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day. It is written in the prophets, And they shall be all taught of God. Every man therefore that hath heard, and hath learned of the Father, cometh unto me. Not that any man hath seen the Father, save he which is of God, he hath seen the Father. Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me hath everlasting life. I am that bread of life. Your fathers did eat manna in the wilderness, and are dead. This is the bread which cometh down from heaven, that a man may eat thereof, and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the

When the people asked what they must do to be doing the work of God, Jesus replied that the work of God is to believe in Him. When the people asked him to give them the bread of life, he responded that He is the Bread of Life. When Thomas asked Him to show them the way to God, Jesus said, “I am the way.” When Martha talked about the resurrection of the dead, Jesus replied, “I am the resurrection.” That makes people angry as well as confused.

The Church meets with a similar reaction when it presses its claims to be the Body of Christ on earth and the vehicle chosen by God to transmit the truth from one generation to another and to all the people on earth. We are considered arrogant, bigoted, and intolerant when we make those claims. We are called upon, as Jesus was, to justify ourselves by what we do, not by what we are or what we claim to be. But just as we cannot allow the world to define our mission for us, neither can we allow the world to define our essential nature for us. We are what God has made us and called us to be.

In sending His Son into the world, God gave the world much more than it expected or would accept. You, the Church, are also more than what the world expects or will accept. You are the Body of Christ, the chosen community of salvation, a colony of heaven on earth, the recipient and the transmitter of the grace and truth of God. You must be faithful to that calling as Jesus was faithful to His.

—oo0oo—

St. Thomas Episcopal Church
Orange, Virginia

August 13, 2006

The Church in our day faces similar complaints. People approach the Church with their own agendas and expect that the Church will help them fulfill their desires. Some seek a full range of services, such as day care for children, recreation for youth, trips and other activities for senior citizens, support groups for people who are recently divorced or trying to lose weight or to kick the smoking habit. There is nothing wrong with such activities provided they grow out of the exercise of faith, but there is something definitely wrong when people think of themselves as customers or patrons and when churches scramble and compete to satisfy market demand.

There are some who define the mission of the Church in terms of bringing about social change. Some expect the Church to work directly in the political realm to promote worthy causes and worthy candidates. There are others who see the Church as a source of funds and publicity and volunteers for other non-profit agencies.

But the Church cannot define its mission by what the world expects. The Church must define its mission as Jesus defined His, by its own conviction of what the will of God requires. We must offer the world, not what it wants but what it needs, and if that means that the people murmur against us, so be it. We are in the best of company. The Jews murmured at Moses as well as at Jesus.

That brings me to the second reason that the Church in our day faces criticism similar to that which Jesus faced. It was not just what Jesus did or failed to do at which people took offense. People were even more offended by Who He claimed to be.

Jesus, at least in John's Gospel, is constantly taking questions and comments from the operative or functional level and responding on the ontological level.

life of the world. The Jews therefore strove among themselves, saying, How can this man give us his flesh to eat? Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you. Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him. As the living Father hath sent me, and I live by the Father: so he that eateth me, even he shall live by me. This is that bread which came down from heaven: not as your fathers did eat manna, and are dead: he that eateth of this bread shall live for ever. These things said he in the synagogue, as he taught in Capernaum [*kah-PURR-nay-umm*]. Many therefore of his disciples, when they had heard this, said, This is an hard saying; who can hear it? When Jesus knew in himself that his disciples murmured at it, he said unto them, Doth this offend you? What and if ye shall see the Son of man ascend up where he was before? It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life. But there are some of you that believe not. For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were that believed not, and who should betray him. And he said, Therefore said I unto you, that no man can come unto me, except it were given unto him of my Father.

“From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him. Then said Jesus unto the twelve, Will ye also go away? Then Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God. Jesus answered them, Have not I chosen you twelve, and one of you is a devil? He spake of Judas Iscariot the son of Simon: for he it was that should betray him, being one of the twelve.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “The Jews then murmured at him, because he said, ‘I am the bread which came down from heaven.’”⁶ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Homily:

I’ve done some murmuring recently myself. There was rain all around us two months ago, but it seemed to be bypassing us. The trees were drying out. The grass was turning brown, the flowers and shrubs were suffering, and the crops were burning up. I prayed for rain, but I didn’t really want the kind of rain we got last month. I grumbled and complained and I told the Lord that these heavy downpours day after day were not really what I had in mind. I don’t think He cared about what I had in mind.

Now we’re back in a drought, and I still think he doesn’t care about my murmuring. God always gives us what we need, but that is not what we want. That’s when the murmuring starts.

When Moses led the people of Israel out of their state of slavery in Egypt, they began to murmur against him and complain about the conditions under which they were living. Freedom was not what they had expected it to be. They were hungry and they wanted to go back to Egypt.

Then God sent down from heaven a strange kind of bread, which they had never seen or tasted or heard of before. They called it “manna”, which means, “What is it?” The Bible does not tell us whether the people liked it or not. It does tell us that after a while they got tired of it. But the manna kept them alive. God did not give them what they wanted, but He gave them what they needed.

So it is in the Second Lesson for today. The people are disappointed and they murmur against Jesus. Ironically, this murmuring comes in the midst of a discussion on the manna episode. The murmuring against Jesus echoes the murmuring against Moses. Jesus likens Himself to the manna. He calls Himself the Bread of Life, which comes down from heaven. He is, however, much more than the manna ever was. The manna kept people alive on the physical level, but the life that Jesus gives is life eternal, because He shares His very own life with all who believe in Him.

That is not what the people wanted to hear. They wanted to hear about a Messiah who would be active politically and socially. They wanted real physical food, not spiritual food. They wanted the Roman occupation ended and the old Davidic monarchy restored. They wanted a social revolution where the rich would be taxed and their property given to the poor. They wanted the kind of things the Presiding Bishop-elect seems to want.

But Jesus offered no such program. So “The Jews then murmured at him, because he said, ‘I am the bread which came down from heaven.’” The people were offended at Jesus for two reasons. First, He defined His mission in the world differently than they defined it. Therefore, He did not meet their expectations.

Second, the people were offended by the outrageous claims that Jesus was making for Himself. They knew, or thought they knew, His origins and His background. They could not believe that someone so familiar to them, and especially one of such humble social standing and appearance, could possibly be Who Jesus claimed to be. “They said, ‘Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, “I have come down from heaven?”’”