

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER

St. Mark the Evangelist

(April 25)¹

Lessons:²

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the sixth Verse of the sixty-second Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.³

“... I have set watchmen upon thy walls, O Jerusalem, which shall never hold their peace day nor night: ye that make mention of the LORD, keep not silence, And give him no rest, till he establish, and till he make Jerusalem a praise in the earth. The LORD hath sworn by his right hand, and by the arm of his strength, Surely I will no more give thy corn to be meat for thine enemies; and the sons of the stranger shall not drink thy wine, for the which thou has laboured: But they that have gathered it shall eat it, and praise the Lord; and they that have brought it together shall drink it in the courts of my holiness.

“Go through, go through the gates; prepare ye the way of the people; cast up, cast up the highway; gather out the stones; lift up a standard for the people. Behold, the LORD hath proclaimed unto the end of the world, Say ye to the daughter of Zion, Behold, thy salvation cometh; behold, his reward is with him, and his work before him. And they shall call them, The holy people, The redeemed of the LORD: and thou shalt be called, Sought out, A city not forsaken.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the fourth Verse of the fifteenth Chapter of the Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Romans.⁴

“... For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope. Now the God of patience and consolation grant you to be likeminded one toward another according to Christ Jesus: That ye may with one mind and one

mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Wherefore receive ye one another, as Christ also received us to the glory of God. Now I say that Jesus Christ was a minister of the circumcision for the truth of God, to confirm the promises made unto the fathers: And that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy; as it is written, For this cause I will confess to thee among the Gentiles, and sing unto thy name. And again he saith [SETH], Rejoice, ye Gentiles, with his people. And again, Praise the Lord, all ye Gentiles; and laud him, all ye people. And again, Esaias⁵ [*ee-ZYE-uss*] saith [SETH], There shall be a root of Jesse, and he that shall rise to reign over the Gentiles; in him shall the Gentiles trust. Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Homily:

Taking a cue from the opening of today’s Second Lesson, and the fact that this is the Feast of one of the Evangelists, that is, of the author of one of the Four Gospels, the theme of this Morning Prayer can be considered to be similar to that of the Second Sunday in Advent, which has come to be called Bible Sunday. The Collect for that day speaks of two things, one being the obligation of each one of us concerning the Holy Scriptures to “hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them”; the other being the work of the Holy Spirit as He uses those Scriptures to grow patience and comfort within us, so to keeps us along the path to eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord. And, if we think about the Second Lesson today, we find that hope, the same that our Prayer Book calls “the sure and certain hope of the resurrection unto eternal life.”

Recently, someone questioned me on why we refer to *hope* of the resurrection; after all, we hope for things that may never happen. I must disagree; we may wish for things that will never happen; but, hope cannot exist in such wishes. Or we

may hope for things that *might* happen, but might not. However, to emphasize the meaning of hope as it relates to faith, we clarify our meaning with the words “sure and certain.” This comes from the Epistle to the Hebrews:

“Wherein God, willing more abundantly to shew [SHOW] unto the heirs of promise the immutability of his counsel, confirmed it by an oath: That by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us: Which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which entereth into that within the veil.”⁶

It is clear that St. Paul never separated hope from faith, and never separated either of those from charity. The virtues grow together, and hope depends on faith. Hope believes, and love works; faith hopes and charity labors. What feeds us in our sure and certain hope is the word of God. Faith grows within us when hear that particular voice, the voice of God that we discern so clearly as he speaks to us now within the scriptures. They cannot become irrelevant. Written so long ago, when they are spoken or read God himself speaks in the present. Never are they worn out.

People have asked about the Holy Scriptures, when were they put together? One very unfortunate mark of our times is the quickness with which misinformation becomes “common knowledge.” Over the last few years some con artists have discovered that one way to make a lot of money in a hurry is to write a sensational, wholly misleading but shocking thesis about the Bible or Christian Faith in general, and then sell it directly to the public. The more revolutionary it is, the better. The more shocking, the more blasphemous, above all the more sensational, the easier it is to draw attention to it, and get it promoted on TV. We have seen these sensational works, all claim-

ing to be a challenge to the Christian Faith, each make its rise and fall before burning out entirely.

One very important point about that whole new industry of falsehoods is that none of these authors presents his shocking alleged “discovery” in the truly scientific arena of the academic world. If they did, they could not make the same amount of money overnight—or ever. If these shocking “discoveries” were put through the genuine process of scientific analysis, they would die a quick death and be forgotten, and no one would get to make a financial killing. As a result of the sensational, irresponsible and unprofessional, thoroughly unscientific misinformation that has been thrown in the face of the public for the last few years, some people think that the bishops of the Church assembled in Nicea and began cutting books out of the Bible. Most of the people who believe this also think the Emperor Constantine was running the Council of Nicea when it met in 325.

A few facts help to clean up this utter fiction. Even though Constantine was the Emperor, and even though the Christians of that time knew that the Edict of Milan in 313 AD had ended two and a half centuries of persecution (a virtual Holocaust that had made the earliest times of the Church a blood-bath), and even though they knew that the Emperor had the authority to return to the older laws that had made Christianity an offense punishable by death and revive them, he was not given the power to run the Council of Nicea. When the Council met and the Emperor presumed to address the bishops of the Church, they told him that, as a layman, he was not allowed to address the assembled bishops of Christ’s Church. Basically, they told Caesar, the Emperor Constantine to whom they owed so much, to sit down and be quiet.

Now, about the Bible, the bishops at the Council of Nicea did not go about deciding which books were Scripture, and which were not. All they did was to affirm in unity of mind that the books already perceived to be the Word of God were, in-

eternal life. The invitation is extended by His word: come, eat and be filled with the food and drink of eternal life. Come feed on the Living Bread that has come down from heaven, and with hearty and true faith to receive Christ through these humble means unto everlasting life with him in glory.

“Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost.”

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The Rev’d Robert Hart¹²
December 4, 2011

¹ This sermon was originally written on the Epistle for Mass on the Second Sunday in Advent, 2011.

² *Psalms and Lessons for the Fixed Holy Days* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xlv (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

³ Isaiah 62:6-12 (KJV).

⁴ Romans 15:4-13 (KJV).

⁵ *I.e.*, Isaiah. The literal-minded translators of the Authorized or King James Version tended to leave Old Testament names mentioned in the Greek texts of the New Testament in forms related to their Greek transliterations rather than to revert to the more Hebraic Old Testament forms.

⁶ Hebrews 6:17-19 (KJV).

⁷ St. Luke 21:25-33.

⁸ St. Luke 16:31 (KJV).

⁹ Revelation 3:15-16 (KJV).

¹⁰ From Isaiah 6:9.

¹¹ St. Luke 2:32 (KJV).

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word brings dread, this too leads to comfort and hope since the Holy Spirit uses what you hear to bring you to repentance, true repentance from the heart, and to faith in Jesus Christ. May God grant ears to hear, eyes to see and a heart to understand, that each one who has been lost may turn and be healed.¹⁰

Today's Second Lesson speaks of Christ's ministry first to His own people of Israel, and His ministry through those people of Israel that believed in Him and became His disciples as it extends to all nations:

“Now I say that Jesus Christ was a minister of the circumcision for the truth of God, to confirm the promises made unto the fathers: and that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy; as it is written, For this cause I will confess to thee among the Gentiles, and sing unto thy name. And again he saith [SETH], Rejoice, ye Gentiles, with his people. And again, Praise the Lord, all ye Gentiles; and laud him, all ye people. And again, Isaiah saith [SETH], There shall be a root of Jesse, and he that shall rise to reign over the Gentiles; In him shall the Gentiles trust.”

This brings to mind the words of Simeon, that he spoke when he held Jesus as an infant: “A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel.”¹¹ This light and this glory has been known to the world because it is the purpose of God to shine the light of Christ into every dark place. Into the darkness of pagan dread and superstition, into the darkness of ignorance and foolishness, into the darkest places of sin and death.

This glorious light of Christ shines into the darkest places where we try to hide from God due to our own sins; and if we respond to His mercy that same light of revelation brings comfort and hope, the sure and certain hope of the resurrection unto

deed, just that. The Old Testament was not the issue at all, because it was declared to be the Word of God by no less a Person than the Living Word of God. These books had been received by the Jewish people for centuries, and were passed on to the Church with sure and certain authority. The process of recognizing these books was, by all accounts, the *vox populi* (“the voice of the people”, *i.e.*, the general consensus) of the Jews.

The Jewish people knew in what books to find that distinctive voice of God, and so it was that when Jesus Christ walked the earth and referred to the Scriptures, in every synagogue of the Jews were those specific scrolls that formed the common library for all of them. We see in St. Luke that He read from the scroll of the prophets, reading from Isaiah and saying that Scriptures spoke of none other but Himself, Messiah and hope of the world.

In the earliest days of the Church, this Old Testament formed the only Canon of Scripture. But by the early years of the Second Century, we find that twenty-seven additional books were already received and quoted as the word of God, these twenty seven books forming an additional Canon of Scripture. These books are the New Testament. In some places a few questions were raised about II Peter, Jude and Revelation but, over time, the little bit of skepticism about them disappeared.

For example, in a few places some people thought that *The Shepherd of Hermas* might be part of the Canon of the Scriptures of the Church. “Canon” in this usage means “Rule” in the sense of a measuring rule. But long before the Council of Nicea in 325, the Church had defined its Canon of Scripture as the books we have now, adding to the Jewish scriptures it had inherited *only* the twenty-seven books we call the New Testament. Again, as it had been among Israel, when the Scriptures were received and recognized *vox populi*, so it was with the Church of Christ and the Canon of the New Testament. There *were* no books for the bishops to delete, but rather a Canon already established before any of them had been born.

Now, why was *The Shepherd of Hermas* not among the books of this Canon? Again, by that same *vox populi* that, by the principle of whether or not the people of God recognized the voice of God, this book had not been under serious consideration. Simply put, our fathers among the Jews and the early Christians simply did not *hear* the clear and familiar voice of God in any other books as they heard it in the scriptures. They knew the voice of God in the Law, the Prophets, the Wisdom Literature and the Psalms. And they knew that same voice of God in the four Gospels, the Epistles and the prophecy of St. John the Revelator. They did not hear it as the voice of God in other books (not that most of them were ever aware of the many Gnostic [NOSS-tick] writings given so much undue attention by today's money-making sensation mongers).

St. Paul tells us about the high regard we must give to the Old Testament in today's Second Lesson: "*Whatsoever things were written afore time were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope.*"

Think of that history of Israel, from the calling of Abraham to the coming of Jesus Christ who died for our sins and rose again, the history of one people who were never allowed to give themselves over to sin and so be lost among the many pagan nations that served false gods. A people constantly purified by the prophet's words, and many times by purging and suffering, given to captivity in Babylon but returned to their home after seventy years never to fall again into the worship of idols. They were a people so purified that among them was found one young virgin who echoed the faith and obedience of Abraham, and more perfectly than the ancient patriarch himself.

Written aforetime was not only this history of the people through whom the Word, Jesus our Lord, would be incarnate, but the predictions the prophets made concerning His life, His death on the Cross, and His rising again. We all need to read

the Book of Isaiah about the *Suffering Servant* by whose stripes we are healed, and who prolonged His days after dying, that He would live forever as the agent of the Lord's will. We read of His suffering through the words of King David who foresaw the agonies of the Lord's crucifixion, able to predict them in the first person as though suffering with Him. We read also, in the words of this prophet king, of the joy of the resurrection of our Lord whose death was so brief a thing that He never saw corruption.

Saint Luke—from whose twenty-first Chapter we take the Gospel for that Bible Sunday⁷ we have already mentioned—also gives us this hope, for the Lord Himself assures us that His coming again will be our redemption and that the fears and darkness of this age will disappear in the light of His glory. We are told to lift up our heads, not to look down and hang our heads. His coming, His rule over heaven and earth, the cleansing of this world from all evil, from death and suffering, and all such things that will be no more, are sure and certain. And if instead of comfort this fills your heart with fear, then consider that fear with genuine care. It means that you must cast off the works of darkness and out on the armor of light, repent from all your sins and turn to the Lord that you may enter that blessed state of sure and certain hope, and be strengthened by the Holy Spirit.

Does the voice of God fill you with hope or with dread? I hope it does one or the other. For anyone to be indifferent to these words is the only real danger. As our Lord said in his parable of Lazarus and the rich man, "*If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead.*"⁸ Our Lord told the Church of the Laodiceans, "*I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot: I would thou wert cold or hot. So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.*"⁹

Indifference to the word of God is a danger beyond any other, closing the ears that they cannot hear. But even if the