

Sermon for Morning Prayer: The Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity

Lessons: 1 The First Lesson: Here beginneth the fifteenth Verse of the thirteenth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah.

“Hear ye, and give ear; be not proud: for the Lord hath spoken. Give glory to the Lord your God, before he cause darkness, and before your feet stumble upon the dark mountains, and, while ye look for light, he turn it into the shadow of death, and make it gross darkness. But if ye will not hear it, my soul shall weep in secret places for your pride; and mine eye shall weep sore, and run down with tears, because the Lord’s flock is carried away captive. Say unto the king and to the queen, Humble yourselves, sit down: for your principalities shall come down, even the crown of your glory. The cities of the south shall be shut up, and none shall open them: Judah shall be carried away captive all of it, it shall be wholly carried away captive. Lift up your eyes, and behold them that come from the north: where is the flock that was given thee, thy beautiful flock? What wilt thou say when he shall punish thee? for thou hast taught them to be captains, and as chief over thee: shall not sorrows take thee, as a woman in travail?”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the thirty-fifth Verse of the tenth Chapter of the Gospel according to St. Mark.

“And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, come unto him, saying, Master, we would that thou shouldest do for us whatsoever we shall desire. And he said unto them, What would ye that I should do for you? They said unto him, Grant unto us that we may sit, one on thy right hand, and the other on thy left hand, in thy glory. But Jesus said unto them, Ye know not what ye ask: can ye drink of the cup that I drink of? and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with? And they said unto him, We can. And Jesus said unto them, Ye shall indeed drink of the cup that I drink of; and with the baptism that I am baptized withal shall ye be baptized: But to sit on my right hand and on my left hand is not mine to give; but it shall be given to them for whom it is prepared. And when the ten heard it, they began to be much displeased with James and John. But Jesus called them to him, and saith unto them, Ye know that they which are accounted to rule over the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and their great ones exercise authority upon them. But so shall it not be among you: but whosoever will be great among you, shall be your minister: And whosoever of you will be the chiefest, shall be servant of all. For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text: From the Second Lesson: “What will you say when they set as head over you those whom you yourself have taught to be your friends?”² In the Name of the Father, and of the ☩ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Homily: It has always been possible in this world to purchase a certain amount of security at the price of a certain amount of your freedom.

In the early days after the Jews settled in the Holy Land, they were harassed from time to time by various foreign invaders. At those times God raised up leaders called “judges” to protect them. But the people were not satisfied with such ad hoc protection. They wanted a king, like all the great powers that

surrounded them. Samuel warned them that a king would lay heavy taxes upon them and confiscate their property and conscript their labor to support his wars and public works projects and the lavish lifestyle of his court. But the people insisted, and Samuel gave them what they wanted.

He gave them Saul and then David. Then came the great and wise Solomon, who did exactly what Samuel had predicted. He levied high taxes, confiscated property, and conscripted soldiers and forced labor for his wars and his public works, which included the construction of the great temple in Jerusalem. He also maintained a large harem and many servants and officials.

After that, there was a civil war, and the kingdom was divided – Israel in the north and Judea in the south. The Assyrians conquered and annexed the northern kingdom of Israel and were constantly threatening and harassing the southern kingdom of Judea. The king of Judea and his advisors began to look to more powerful nations to protect them.

First it was the Egyptians, but Jeremiah rightly saw that Egypt was not strong enough to take on the Assyrians. Then the rulers turned to Chaldea, which had just defeated the Assyrians in the battle of Carchemesh. Jeremiah saw what would happen next and counseled against it. He said that if the Jews sent messengers to the Chaldeans, complimenting them on their victory and cultivating their friendship, they would wake up one day to discover that their friends and protectors had become their masters and the spiritual resources God had given them would be lost.

“Where is the flock that was given you, your beautiful flock? What will you say when they set as head over you those whom you yourself have taught to be your friends?”

As a matter of fact it turned out to be the Babylonians who conquered the southern Kingdom, but that was not because the Chaldeans failed to protect them. It was because God, whom the Jews had forsaken, gave them over to the pagan gods they had chosen to serve.

In the days of Jesus, it was the Romans who ruled the entire country – north and south. How do you think that happened? Right. A petty tyrant named Herod invited the Romans to help him in another civil war. In politics you become the servant of those to whom you turn for help. But it is not only true in politics. Consider the case of Dr. Faust, who made a personal pact with the devil. Faust was given everything his heart desired, and it cost his soul.

Modern man does not go around making pacts with the devil, at least not directly, but every one puts his trust in something and in turn winds up serving what he relies on for security. It may be real estate, or the stock market, or a business. It may be a man’s own brains or the skill of his hands. He may rely on drugs or alcohol for security, or he may turn to crime or rely on some kind of charity. Whatever it is, he will find his life controlled by what he turns to for security.

Some people turn to the government, not only for protection from enemies and criminals but from financial difficulties and other difficulties as well. Thomas Jefferson pointed out, however, that a government big enough to give you everything you want is big enough to take it all away. It is a simple historical fact that countries that take the socialist road almost always wind up as dictatorships.

Even if you simply purchase an insurance policy on a piece of property, the company may place restrictions on the use you may make of that property. The principle holds. Whose protection you seek becomes your master.

“What will you say when they set as head over you those whom you yourself have taught to be your friends?”

Religion is really no different. When you turn to God for security, you give up the right to do as you please. When you take Jesus as your Savior, you take Him as your Lord. But there is a 5 difference between putting your trust in Jesus and putting your trust in other gods or other things. When you turn to Jesus as your savior and place yourself at His service, you find a new kind of freedom. The burden of your sins is lifted and borne by Him. You become free to develop into the kind of person you were created and destined to be. You owe no man. You fear the loss of nothing, not even your life. You become obligated to the Spirit and not to the flesh, as St. Paul says.

“Take my yoke upon you and learn of me,” says Jesus, “for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

The burden Jesus speaks of is light by comparison to the burdens that the Pharisees placed upon the people. It is certainly light compared to the burden of our sins, of which the Prayer Book says, “the burden of them is intolerable.” But the really important thing about this saying of Jesus is the analogy of the yoke.

A yoke is designed for the sharing of a burden. You place it on the shoulders of two oxen or other beasts of burden and together they pull the load. So it is with the yoke of Jesus. When you take upon yourself the obligations of a Christian life, you find that Jesus Himself is in the same yoke with you and is helping you to do what He requires. You really can’t make a better deal than that.

Who else will share with you the burdens that they lay upon you in exchange for security? Will the government do that? Will the business world do that? Will your investment portfolio do that? Will your education do that? Will the modern Puritans, successors to the Pharisees, do that? No! Only him who is meek and lowly of heart will do that. None of those things I have mentioned can be said to be meek and lowly of heart, and none of them will descend to your level, as Jesus did, and help you bear the burden of what they require from you in exchange for your security.

Jeremiah asks the right question. It is the question that everyone must ask before committing his life to any person or any institution. “What will you say when they set as head over you those whom you yourself have taught to be your friends?”

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St. David’s Anglican Church Charlottesville, Virginia September 26, 2010 1 Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxxiv (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943). 2 Jeremiah 13: 21.