

+ At the close of the parable which Jesus tells in today's Gospel, the rich man begs Abraham to send Lazarus to his five living brothers, as a witness to urge them toward repentance and amendment of life. Abraham replies, "They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them." The rich man protests: "Nay, father Abraham: but if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent." To this, Christ makes Abraham respond: "If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead." I'm beginning with this rather hard saying, because I intend to do something a little different today, and in the weeks to come, when I have opportunity to preach. Over the course of His teaching, Jesus makes a number of remarkable comments about the relationship of the New Covenant, established by His ministry and sacrifice, and the older tradition of sacred scripture which we call the "Old Testament." "I came not to abolish the law or the prophets, but to fulfill," Christ teaches in the sermon on the mount. "Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven." Of course, perhaps the most powerful statement which the Lord offers is that which we recite every Eucharist, in what is called the Summary of the Law; "On these two commandments," (the love of God and of neighbor) Christ teaches His disciples, "hang all the law and the prophets."

Love is likewise a central theme in the lesson read this morning from St. John's epistle, in which the apostle reminds his audience that God *is* love, "and this commandment have we from him, that he who loveth God love his brother also." We have before us, then, a complex of ideas. God Himself is Love, that Love is perfectly revealed in the person of His Son, who came to fulfill the Law and the Prophets. The summary of that Law and Prophecy of the Old Testament consists in a commandment to love God and to love one another. Yet Christ affirms in His parable that, unless we hear the law and the prophets, the revelation of His perfect Love, fulfilled in His passion, death, and resurrection, is without the necessary power of persuasion. In short, there is something in the Old Testament, in the record of God's loving relationship with the people of Israel, that requires our attention and understanding. It is something that must be grasped, before its fulfillment in Christ can be fully apprehended. I'm going to argue, in a little bit, that this "thing" in the Old Testament has to do with a basic understanding of Divine Love itself, with that charity which surpasses and exalts all lower and merely human affections.

All this to say: We modern Anglicans, though few of us would disagree with the importance of the Old Testament, can incline toward a sort of functional Marcionism. Marcion, you may or may not remember, was a very early Christian heretic, of the 2nd century A.D., who basically wanted to rid Christianity of all its Hebrew baggage. Out with the Old Testament—which he considered was written under the influence of an older, malevolent deity, and in with a severely limited New Testament of his own devising, consisting basically of Luke's gospel and heavily-edited versions of some of Paul's epistles. It was actually in response to this heresy that the catholic Christians first considered compiling authoritative lists of the canonical scriptures, adamantly affirming the authority and value of the Hebrew Old Testament. Our own 39 Articles of Religion, that document drawn up in the reign of Queen Elizabeth to define Anglican belief and practice, solemnly affirms: "The Old Testament is not contrary to the New: for both in the Old and New Testament everlasting life is offered to Mankind by Christ, who is the only Mediator between God and Man, being both God and Man. Wherefore they are not to be heard, which feign that the old Fathers did look only for transitory promises" (Art. VII). However, as the use of the Daily Office has slowly passed out of parish life, so the Old Testament has faded somewhat out of Anglican consciousness.

In this season of ordinary time, therefore, I'm going to do something different, as I said, when it comes up my turn to preach: I'm going to bring to our attention the Old Testament lesson which the Prayer Book assigns for the office of Morning Prayer on the given Sunday, and use it as a portal through which to explore the meaning of the Epistle and the Gospel. I promise not to be as long-winded on subsequent Sundays as I've been already today; in fact, I'm going to let Fr. Brian Oldfield pick up this project next week. He's coming up to assist at an Anglican youth camp with me next week, and he's assured me that his parishioners at All Saint's down in Fernandina Beach would tar and feather him if he exceeded a twelve-minute homily. But I felt that this was a

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St. John's Anglican Church, Greensboro, North Carolina

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necessary introduction for this venture back into the Old Testament.

If you ever look at the Office Calendar in the Prayer Book, which you can find in the very front, on those Roman-numeral pages ten through forty-five, you'll find that certain Sunday lessons from the Old Testament are marked with an asterisk. These lessons, the introduction notes, "are particularly appropriate for use when Morning Prayer with one Lesson precedes the Holy Communion." They have been chosen, that is, to correspond with and cast light upon the Epistle and the Gospel which are read at the Communion service. Our lesson appointed for today is a short one, taken from the prophet Jeremiah.

Jeremiah was a prophet who lived and ministered in the city of Jerusalem from the last years of the 7th century B.C., until and shortly after its capture and sack by the neo-Babylonian Empire in 587. Basically, he had the enviable task of proclaiming to God's people that the End of Israel was finally at hand. The kingdom had already been divided for nearly three-hundred years, and now the rump of David's dynasty was about to make shipwreck on the rock of Babylon. The people of Jerusalem and the surrounding Judaeen countryside had largely, by this time, adopted a syncretistic religion that incorporated the Canaanite Baal-worship of the surrounding Gentiles, with all its murderous sacrifice and, as I mentioned in a previous homily, sub-abdominal fixation. Because of his lament over the situation, and his dire prophecies of impending collapse and judgment, Jeremiah is often called, "The Weeping Prophet," and, to this day, one who does something similar for his own contemporary culture is said to write or to speak "a Jeremiad." We find written in the 23rd chapter, beginning in the 23rd verse:

Am I a God at hand, saith the Lord, and not a God afar off? Can any hide himself in secret places that I shall not

see him? Do not I fill heaven and earth? I have heard what the prophets said, that prophesy lies in my name, saying, I have had a vision, I have had a vision. How long shall this be in the heart of the prophets that prophesy lies? Yea, they are prophets of the deceit of their own heart, which think to cause my people to forget my name by their visions which they tell every man to his neighbor, as their fathers have forgotten my name for Baal. The prophet that truly hath a vision, let him tell it, and he that hath my word, let him speak it faithfully.

Is it possible for us also to prophesy lies in the name of God? St. John seems to think so; "If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?" Yet we see also, from considering Christ's parable, that hatred is not only an active thing, but also a passive one. The rich man's failure to extend charity to Lazarus—whose name ironically means, in Hebrew, "God has helped"—this omission was equivalent to hatred, and that hatred of neighbor is equivalent to hatred and enmity with God, fixing a great chasm between them. "He that loveth not," St. John observes, "knoweth not God." The prophet Jeremiah continues:

"What is the chaff to the wheat," saith the Lord. "Is not my word like as a fire, and like a hammer that hews the cliffside?"

Why do we prefer the "deceits of our own hearts" to the authentic and transforming Word of God? If we have the choice between straw to eat, or grain to make flour, why do we choose the straw? This is, of course, the mystery of human sinfulness. We tell ourselves that, like the rich man of the parable, we are feasting sumptuously every day, that is, we deceive ourselves that our lusts and desires, which are merely forms of consumption—consumption of goods, of time, and of other human beings—we deceive ourselves that these are equivalent to or proper replacements of that charity toward God and Man which is the essence of a life lived in the power of the Holy Spirit. God's word, and God's love, are like fire, and like a hammer. The fire warms, gives light, and fuels our sustenance. The hammer carves out of the cliff those stones for the building up of the kingdom, and shapes and fashions each according to its purpose and end. This is the work of the Holy Spirit. But, the prophet warns us, to those who reject God's word and His love, which is intimately bound up with the love of neighbor, that fire and that hammer become not tools of comfort and construction, but altogether their

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opposites—the tragedy is that Divine charity, rejected by man, becomes that very chasm which separates him finally from God.

Therefore, behold, I am against the prophets, saith the Lord, that steal my words every one from his neighbor. I am

against the prophets that use their tongues and say “God saith it.” I am against them that prophesy false dreams, who speak them out and cause my people to err by their deceptions, and by their extravagance; yet I sent them not, nor commanded them: therefore they shall not profit this people at all.

God says, to these false prophets, as Christ will say also to those who have rejected charity while claiming to be followers of His name: “I never knew you—I am against you.”

Now, some of you may be saying to yourselves at this point: This is what comes of preaching on the Old Testament. It's all fire and brimstone, judgment and impending doom. In truth, the Word of God in the Old Testament is usually a bit on the rough side. But we need that rough side, in order to make sense of the Gospel. “Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation of our sins.” The seed of true charity, that fire and that hammer that must come and do its work on our hearts, burning out our selfish lusts and building up the love of God and neighbor, that seed has been planted not by us, but by God Himself. “Hereby know we that we dwell in Him, and He in us, because He hath given us of his Spirit,” and “we have boldness in the day of judgment: because as he is, so are we in this world.” We have the wheat, and not the chaff. We possess, in the fellowship of our love, one to another, and in the love of all, united as members of Christ toward God, that Seed which, having fallen into the ground and having died, now brings forth much fruit. In that confidence, despite the weakness of our mortal nature, we trust that God's fire and His hammer will do their work of grace within us, conforming us more and more to the image of His Son. Let us approach then, in that love which casts out fear, to the throne of grace, to the altar of thanksgiving, there with boldness to feed on the True Vision, the Living Word, the Light of the World and the Bread of Heaven, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. + Amen.