

Homily for Trinity XVII

+ The wrath of God is a mysterious thing—yes, I'm going to preach this morning on that extremely popular and approachable subject. If there is any immediate advantage to speaking of “the wrath of God,” it's probably that “wrath” is not a word that we use much anymore, at least in reference to human things. A man can be angry, bitter, or hateful, but we hardly ever speak anymore of a wrathful man. This happy accident, linguistically speaking, serves us in reminding that there is a great difference between Divine wrath and those passions, whether hot or cold, that we describe as merely human anger or hatred. In fact, the propers appointed for this 17th Sunday in Trinitytide demonstrate to us a particularly profound truth—that the love of God, and the wrath of God, are mysteriously conjoined.

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?

So writes the prophet Jeremiah to the people of Jerusalem and Judah, shortly before they were to fall before the armies of Babylon.

The principal thing to notice here is the simple fact of the warning. “Give glory to the Lord,” the prophet pleads with the people. That doesn't mean “say more elaborate prayers” or “slaughter more animal sacrifices.” The words of the prophet Jeremiah were directed to a nation that had systemically rejected the righteousness of God. When we speak of righteousness, we are, unfortunately, prone to the same simplistic kind of thinking as with “wrath.” When we speak of righteousness, I think that most of us immediately imagine something like “moral perfection” or even sinlessness. We individualize it. I'm not contesting that there is this element to righteousness, but that, scripturally speaking, it is a much larger concept, one that encompasses not only individual morality, but the justice, or injustice, of entire peoples and societies. The righteousness of God is equivalent to that “kingdom of God,” for which we pray, every day and at every Eucharist, “Thy kingdom come.” It refers to an order, and to a community, in which every member is incorporated into a harmony, a symphony of humanity that truly gives glory to its maker. In that order, each member is to flourish as an image of his or her Creator. In the prophetic imagination of the prophet Jeremiah, this order was typified in the idea of justice for the weak and powerless; specifically, he often makes mention of the widow, and the fatherless—classes of people in the ancient world who had been deprived of protection and provision, and of all those vital connections that firmly seat us in community with our fellow human beings. While the people of ancient Judah, in the 7th and 8th centuries before Christ, had in many ways avoided the wholesale religious and cultural perversions of their brethren to the North, who had adopted the pagan values and practices of the surrounding nations, the principal accusation and the warning of Jeremiah is directed against a people who, while maintaining the outward forms of God's worship, have abandoned the right order of their life together in promoting the collective flourishing and harmony that truly gives glory to God.

In a very real way, these Judaeans addressed by the Old Testament prophet were very much like the Pharisees with whom Christ had to deal in our gospel lesson today. While a sick man sits outside the gate of a devout man's house on the sabbath day, the assembled teachers of the law, the outwardly and formally righteous and morally correct persons circle up and begin to do their holy muttering. Who invited this strange Galilean rabbi? I hear that he is a healer. I wonder, will he prove himself a truly righteous man, by passing him by, going in to dinner, and eating while this bloated, diseased unfortunate continues to suffer. True and undefiled religion is this, in the estimation of these righteous men. This, at any rate, must be their thought process, spoken or silent, for we are told that Jesus *answers them*, though no one asks him anything: “Is it lawful—is it right, is it just—to heal on the Sabbath day or not?” This amounts to the question: just what do you think that God's Sabbath, His day of rest, the weekly and sacramental commemoration of His goodness and providence *is exactly?*

For the Pharisees, it is a day of honoring, not God Himself, nor His image which is present to them in the suffering man outside the door, but of honoring themselves. It is a “pat yourself on the back” kind of religion. Against this religion, this way of life, the wrath of God is revealed. It comes, slowly perhaps, but surely, because it *must come*, as inescapably as the pains, Jeremiah says, of a woman in her travail. The pride and negligence of the wicked actually summons it. “What will thou say,” Jeremiah issues this challenge to the people of Jerusalem, “when He,” when God, “shall punish thee?” *For thou hast taught them*—and the “them” here are the savage Babylonians who will shortly conquer God's people—to *be captains, and as chiefs over thee*. The rejection of God's true Sabbath, a turning away from His Holy Order, is simultaneously an invitation. Where the love of God is refused, His wrath is, practically speaking, invoked and enthroned. We cannot live without God. Either we orient ourselves rightly toward Him, and toward His image in our fellow man, or else we inhabit a space in which that detriment is either corrected or abolished.

One of the oldest images of this mysteriously conjoined Love and Wrath of God is that of fire, or the heat of light, like that of the Sun. It is in the light of the Sun that, physically speaking, we live and move and have our being. It warms us, its heat and light cause to grow up, in the words of the scriptures, grain, oil, new wine, and herb for the service of men. But go out into some desert place, a place too close or at a disastrous angle to that distant star, and the same source of warmth, of light, and of bounty becomes a mortal danger, its searing gaze, in the words of the English poet, Yeats, both “blank and pitiless.” This is not a bad metaphor, though “pitiless” is inaccurate, for God, unlike the desert sun, continually warns, reproves, and even pleads with the wayward to repent, to return to the softer climate of Divine order and justice.

The Providence of God is that banquet which Christ describes in His parable to the Pharisees. It is the banquet of life itself, to which the Master and Creator of all things bids us come. The table is set, and each is to have his place. What Jesus tells us, not only through His parable, but through His deeds, and most centrally, His submission to the Father on the cross at Golgotha, is that the place we are to take at this Table, within this Divine order, is determined not by any grasping, not by influence-peddling, not by ascending through the man-made hierarchies of power, wealth, or public opinion. The highest place is to be given to Him who approaches the feast of life in humble gratitude, in deference and in service to others, in all lowliness and meekness, with long-suffering, with that forbearance borne of genuine love and affection, in an endeavor to keep the Spirit of unity and in the bond of peace. That is how we are to behave at table.

The contrary behavior, the behavior of pride and self-advancement, is not only rude and disruptive, it inescapably rouses the attention, and commands the attention, of the Master of this feast.

SERMON – SEVENTEENTH SUDAY AFTER TRINITY – 23 SEPTEMBER 2018

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

Father Peter Joslyn

He will come to set things straight, to say to those who have attempted to seize the Divine order for their own purposes: "Give place." That is the Wrath of God. It is, at the same time, the humiliation of the proud, and the exaltation of the low and long-suffering. It is never purely negative. The Wrath of God is the Love of God, and it all depends on where you sit.

Where then, will we sit, we who have come to the Table of God's altar. In humility, in the knowledge that we have been healed. In thankfulness, as genuinely pleased with the simple grace of life's own invitation to communion with one another, and with God Himself. With the grace of God before us and behind us, both preventing and following, as we pray in the collect, directing our steps in giving true glory to God, in the way that we speak one to another, in opening our hands and our hearts to each others' necessities, in the raising of our children, in our marriages, places of work, and in the silences of our most secret meditations. Easy enough, right? This is our vocation, this is the true feast of life, and, even if it seems something difficult to attain, we must remain hungry for this Heavenly Food. For Our God, in His love and in His wrath, has promised to satiate this desire. He will fill the hungry with good things, he will exalt the humble, but the rich—those who are rich in the things of this world but poor in soul—He will send empty away, scattering the proud, as Our Lady sings, in the imagination of their hearts. Let the imaginations of our hearts, now and always, be turned in love to Christ, both in the Heavenly places, and in His dwelling-place among His saints on earth. + Amen.