

Evensong: 26th Feb 2012.

Lessons: Deut 8 vv1-10; Psalm 51; John 12 vv44-50

Text: John 12 vv 49-50. "I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself commanded me what to say and how to speak. I know that his commands are eternal life."

Today we celebrate not only the First Sunday in Lent, but the Feast of Bishop Nestor of Magydus in Pamphilia, (in Turkey) who was tortured and crucified in 251 AD during the persecution of the church by the Emperor Decius. Why should we remember him? He sent his flock into hiding, but stayed himself to represent them – saving others, he declined to save himself. He took his faith seriously – I wonder if we really do the same? Just a thought

But there is more in the lessons this evening to demand our attention than the story of the courageous bishop.

The lesson from Deuteronomy may well have been chosen because it contains the famous response quoted by Jesus to repel the Devil's first temptation (V.3) "He humbled you to teach you that man cannot live on bread alone, but lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord," (and note the significance of the term "Word" - the source of all that is, seen and unseen, the "Word" that brought the universe into being, the "Word" which was made flesh in Jesus Christ). But there is much else in the lesson than an echo of the Temptations in the Wilderness. The reading sums up a great deal of what is expected of us if we want to call ourselves heirs to the promises of God – and also the generosity of God to those who conform. (v.1) "you must carefully observe everything that I command you this day so that you may live and increase and may enter and occupy the land that the Lord promised to your forefathers" That is the essence of the ancient Covenant – "You shall be my people, and I shall be your God." There is a danger here that we may fall prey to the selective "literalists" (wrongly called "fundamentalists" when they abandon the fundamental principles in favour of the literal words – an issue which Jesus frequently raised with the Pharisees, but which still with us among the creationists and their allies). "Everything" in Deuteronomy is captured in the mantra which many Jews have worn on their foreheads and, with Christians, have recited in the hour of their death, "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is One, and you shall love the Lord with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind – and your neighbour as yourself." or, as the prophet Micah put it (6 v 8) "Do justice, show mercy, walk humbly with your God". That is what our Lenten resolutions should be about – taking up rather than giving up.

The Psalm (51) underlined that message: (v1 & v15 ff) "Be gracious to me, O God, in thy true love: in the fullness of thy mercy, blot out my

misdeeds Open my lips, O Lord, that my mouth may proclaim thy praise. Thou hast no delight in sacrifice: if I brought thee an offering thou wouldst not accept it, My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a wounded heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.” There is the basis for our Lenten resolutions – to examine ourselves; to bring ourselves before God in prayer; confessing our shortcomings, our misdoings, and our failure to live out the promises which were made on our behalf at our Baptism and which we renewed at our Confirmation. Everything else starts from there in this, our great penitential season. And just because we know, as St John reminds us in his epistle (1 John 4 v9) that “God is love” and rejoices in every sinner that repents, that does not mean that we can trot off to Confession on Friday and to get drunk on Saturday – as the Psalmist puts it, “my sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit, a wounded heart O God, thou wilt not despise.”

So, if our readings from the Old Testament, interpreted in the light of the Gospel of Christ, provide a solid underpinning and guide for our keeping Lent appropriately – and I need not remind you that “Lent” means Springtime, or the season of spiritual growth – what have we to learn from the passage from St John's Gospel which was our second lesson this evening?

In St John's narrative, this is the last statement which Jesus makes before the story moves on to the events in the Upper Room on the eve of the Passover and Passiontide. New Testament scholars remind us that the first three gospels are presented as narratives in the strict sense – that the events described are in the same order as they were recalled as happening in real time – but the gospel of St John is arranged in a slightly different way, emphasising themes which the writer was inspired to present rather than in a strict chronology. So this final public statement which Jesus makes is clearly intended to be very important. It concludes a tumultuous chapter in which is recorded the triumphant ride of Jesus into Jerusalem and the days of very robust debates which followed as Jesus was challenged by the religious orthodoxy and hailed by the ordinary people. Archbishop William Temple (“Readings in St John's Gospel” p196-7) puts it far better than I can:-

“The vital point is that He is the spokesman and representative of the Father. To trust Him is to trust the Father; to observe or contemplate Him is to observe or contemplate the Father. He is come not to give light to the world, but to be light in the world, so that those who believe in or trust Him are delivered from its darkness. His purpose is not judgement but redemption. But judgement follows the offer of redemption. He who has heard and rejected the Gospel is not in the same position as one who has never heard it. The message which he heard is his accuser. And this is so because that message is not original in the sense that it originated in the speaker. It comes through Him, like His glory (Ch1 v14) from the

Father. The Father gave commandment what the Son should say, and *his commandment is eternal life.*

It is not said that His commandment leads to eternal life, or that by keeping it we may win that life; but *his commandment is eternal life.* For his commandment is not a stark precept given by supreme authority; it is direction given by almighty love; it is the bidding of a Father given to His children for their true welfare; it is the impact of His holy love upon our consciences and wills.

Temple concludes the chapter with a prayer – familiar to those who know the Collects from the old prayer books:

“O Almighty God, who alone canst order the unruly wills and affections of sinful men; grant unto thy people that they may love the thing which thou commandest and desire that which thou dost promise: that so among the sundry and manifold changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Lent calls us to a renewed commitment to conform to the Law, as captured in the two Great Commandments, the implications of which were spelled out for the Children of Israel as they looked across Jordan to their Promised land; it calls us to repentance for our failures to respond lovingly to those Great Laws of Love; and it reminds us of the heart of our faith – that “I and the Father are One” as Jesus put it, and God is love.

Amen.