

SERMON NOTES

Fourth Sunday of Hisnag
(Fourth Sunday of Advent)

Synaxis Gospel
Luke 17:1-10

FAITH IN CHRIST: ITS ENEMIES, ITS DEFENSE, ITS RESULT

INTRODUCTION

The lessons during Advent, this year, have been selected from the Gospel of Luke. In this account, as Jesus made his way to Jerusalem for the last time, He taught His disciples many things that would prepare them for their future ministry after His crucifixion, resurrection and ascension. Our readings have concentrated on a few of those teachings. Today's reading will look at the vulnerability of the weakest among the disciples, the necessity of forgiveness, the exercise of faith, and the humility of service.

In previous lessons, we have seen that the disciples had been sent out to preach to the villages of the Jews with the power to heal and cast out demons. However on their return, during this final journey, Jesus began to tell them of His approaching death. They did not accept this, and their refusal to believe Jesus may indicate the state of their faith. Although they had been with Jesus during His entire ministry, and had witnessed all His wonderful miracles, their faith was not really firm until after the Resurrection, and they had seen the risen Lord.

To better understand our reading, we should take a quick glance at its immediate context. As Jesus and his band of disciples moved from village to village, approaching Jerusalem, the scribes and Pharisees opposed Him. They were extremely critical of His ministry among those they considered sinners, chief among whom were the tax collectors. These social rejects were attracted to Jesus and His teachings, but were especially vulnerable and weak. They along with children were the "little ones" among His disciples.

SYNAXIS READING

Luke 17:1-10

And He said to His disciples, "It is inevitable that stumbling blocks should come, but woe to him through whom they come! It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea, than that he should cause one of these little ones to stumble.

"Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' forgive him."

And the apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith."

And the Lord said, "If you had faith like a mustard seed, you would say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and be planted in the sea'; and it would obey you."

"But which of you, having a slave plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come immediately and sit down to eat'?"

"But will he not say to him, 'Prepare something for me to eat, and properly clothe yourself and serve me until I have eaten and drunk; and afterward you will eat and drink'?"

"He does not thank the slave because he did the things which were commanded, does he?"

"So you too, when you do all the things which are commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy slaves, we have done only that which we ought to have done.'"

NOTES

And He said to His disciples, "It is inevitable that stumbling blocks should come, but woe to him through whom they come!"

Jesus is the speaker. The disciples are the 12, but may include others. Verse 5 indicates that at least the "apostles" were present. Luke presents this episode as a continuation of a teaching episode in which also the Pharisees were listening. Earlier, Luke had mentioned both Pharisees and scribes. However, the term "disciples" may have included the "tax-collectors and sinners" that the scribes and Pharisees criticized Jesus for receiving.

The Greek term σκάνδαλα translated "stumbling blocks" had the original Greek idea of *bait* or *snare* for a trap. New Testament usage nuances are *temptations to sin*, and *offense*.

Life in a fallen world means that those who are inexperienced will fall victim to snares, entrapments, and temptations to sin.

That the trap may prove deadly, or at least extremely harmful, to the victim is the cause for Jesus' severe judgment—anguish—against the snare-setter.

It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea,

A millstone was used for grinding grain and was used in pairs. The heavier one could weigh up to ninety pounds.

This image envisions either the mill stone attached to the offender by means of a rope or chain passed through the hole in its center, or the man wearing the millstone like a collar with his head sticking through the hole.

than that he should cause one of these little ones to stumble.

“One of these little ones” refers to the inexperienced among the disciples, whether children or new disciples. These probably included the tax collectors and “sinners”.

That it would be better to die a horrible death by drowning with a mill stone hung around the neck, rather than to be an ensnarer, shows how serious Jesus views the deeds of those who would lead astray the “little ones.”

Be on your guard!

“Be on your guard!” προσέχετε εαυτοῖς (Pay attention to yourselves!) may reference the preceding teaching concerning the σκάνδαλα, or the next teaching about forgiveness.

If the preceding teaching is meant, the caution may be for the “little ones” to watch out against those who would lead them astray.

Jesus may also be addressing those among the disciples who might lead others astray. This is a great sin and they must take care how they teach. During St. Paul’s last visit with the leaders of the Church at Ephesus, he made this warning statement to them:

Take heed unto yourselves, and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you bishops, to feed the church of the Lord which he purchased with his own blood.

I know that after my departing grievous wolves shall enter in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Wherefore watch you ... Acts 20:28-31

From among those very bishops that the Holy Spirit had appointed, through the laying on of hands by Paul, some would come who would teach perverse things! Sadly the Church has not always heeded the warnings of Jesus and of St. Paul and she has sometimes fallen victim to the perverse teachings of men appointed to great responsibility.

If “Be on your guard!” pertains to what follows, it would seem to underscore the importance of forgiving others no matter how often he or she sins against you and asks to be forgiven.

If your brother sins, rebuke him;

This is a third class conditional Greek sentence indicating either a probable future action, or a hypothetical situation. Jesus is saying either of two things: 1) If your brother sins and he probably will, rebuke him, or 2) hypothetically speaking, if your brother sins, then rebuke him. Either way, the disciples are commanded to rebuke a brother who sins. The connection with the preceding teaching is that given the dangers of those seeking to lead astray the weaker disciples, it is the disciples’ duty to watch over each other and correct those straying.

and if he repents, forgive him.

Again, Jesus uses a third class conditional sentence. There is a probability that the brother will repent, but even speaking hypothetically, if he does repent, the disciples are commanded to forgive him.

And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ forgive him.”

Here, we can probably safely say that this third class conditional sentence indicates a hypothetical situation. But the Lord stresses that, no matter how often we are asked to forgive, we will forgive.

Seven times is a number of completeness.

And the apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith.”

Literally “Put faith in us.” Or “Add faith to us.” The situation that Jesus had been describing called for more faith than they knew they had.

And the Lord said, “If you had faith like a mustard seed, you would say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and be planted in the sea’; and it would obey you.”

This is a second-class conditional Greek sentence; it assumes the premise is false for argument’s sake. Jesus is actually saying: If you had faith (which you do not have), like a mustard seed, you would do astounding things. Jesus is not talking about the faith that a mustard seed possesses. This is a comparison of size. The mulberry tree can be quite large, while the mustard seed is quite small. Even small faith can overcome huge obstacles.

This is not simply faith, obviously. It is faith in Christ. It is always the object of the faith that is important.

After the Resurrection and Pentecost, the apostles would perform mighty miracles in the name of Jesus Christ because their faith in Him was finally settled.

“But which of you, having a slave plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, ‘Come immediately and sit down [literally: recline] to eat’?”

After portraying what just a bit of faith in Him will achieve, Jesus closed this section of teaching with counsel for humility. In that day, when the disciples find themselves achieving all they are called to do for the kingdom, they must remember to be humble.

Jesus chose to illustrate this humility with an example that they would understand in their culture. The slave in the illustration is responsible in the physical world for working in the grain fields or shepherding sheep. The disciples will be responsible for similar work in the spiritual realm. They will plow, sow, and reap the word of God. They will shepherd God’s flock.

If any of the disciples were the master in this physical illustration, would they treat the slave to dinner when his duties were not complete? The expected answer is “Of course not!”

But will he not say to him, ‘Prepare something for me to eat, and properly clothe yourself and serve me until I have eaten and drunk; and afterward you

will eat and drink’?

No, every one of them would tell the slave to complete his service for the day; afterwards he could eat his dinner.

“He does not thank the slave because he did the things which were commanded, does he?

The master of the slave expects the slave to perform his duties. Performance of duty is not a gift for which the slave would expect thanks.

So you too, when you do all the things which are commanded you,

The disciples should view themselves in the position of such a slave when they are doing their work in the kingdom.

say, ‘We are unworthy slaves, we have done only that which we ought to have done.’ ”

The disciples—who because of their faith in Him, in the future, will do wondrous work for God—are counseled to assume the same humility of the slave who performed all his duties for the master.

APPLICATION

Our church, like the band of disciples who followed Jesus, is a mixture of the strong and experienced in the faith of Christ and the weak and struggling to find faith in Him. All of us fall somewhere in this continuum. One’s position in the Church does not necessarily match one’s degree of faith. A highly respected Armenian theologian once confessed he had no faith in God, but was struggling to find it. On the other hand a simple woman taught herself to read by memorizing the synaxis readings she heard in church and seeing them in her beloved Armenian Bible. She worshipped Christ everyday of her poor and difficult life.

There were predators in Jesus’ day that preyed on the “little ones,” those struggling to find faith in Him. There are predators in our day as well who ensnare our “little ones.” Our culture, with its emphasis on sexuality, beckons enticingly. Our booksellers make millions selling Dan Brown’s faith killer, *The Da Vinci Code*.¹ ‘Educational’ shows on television feature ‘expert’ theologians who cast doubt on the reality of the Resurrection. “Little ones” are easily entrapped and many times are forever lost.

There are those within the Church as well who stumble the “little ones.” These are those who teach what Jesus and St. Paul would have called “perverse things.” There are also those, like the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus’ day, who would draw attention away from the center of our faith, Jesus Christ, to our traditions and our national heritage. When the eyes of the “little ones” are drawn away from Jesus Christ they become even weaker and

¹ Although many readers rightly understand and dismiss Brown’s book as simply a piece of fiction, the faith of others is blocked or destroyed by the book’s claim that ancient documents support the false and pernicious view that the deity of Jesus was only a creation of the fourth century Church. According to the book, He was just a “mortal prophet” who had sired children with Mary Magdalene. See page 254 of *The Da Vinci Code* (New York: Doubleday, 2003).

instead of becoming strong disciples of our Lord, they fall completely, and often become ensnarers themselves.

What are we to do! Jesus commands us to “take heed” to ourselves. Those of us who teach: are we teaching sound doctrine drawn from the sacred pages of the Gospel? Are we aware that the “little ones” are our responsibility? Whether they grow in faith or fall victim to entrapments depends on what we teach them.

“Little ones”: beware of the dangers. Read and study your Bible every single day. Listen to Christ. Be guided by Him. He, Who is the living God, Who became a man to die for your sins, was indeed resurrected and now sits on the throne of Heaven. He will help you and strengthen you. You can safely rest your faith in Him.

We are all commanded to watch over each other. If one of our number falls into sin, we are commanded to correct him or her. When we are corrected, we must repent and ask forgiveness. We are further commanded to support each other by freely forgiving each other, no matter how often this must be done. In this way, we form a mighty defense against the ensnarers.

The disciples’ faith only became strong after the Resurrection. They finally understood the wonderful truth that their Master was Almighty God Incarnate in Jesus Christ. They finally understood that His death on the Cross had been necessary for our salvation, but having accomplished that, He lives forevermore. Then, and only then, they were able to turn the world upside down for Christ. However, Jesus counseled those who would have great faith to be humble in doing all for God.

We are post-Resurrection Christians. Our faith will become like those mighty Apostles’ when we fully accept the reality of the Resurrection and all that it means with regard to 1) Who Jesus Christ really is and 2) what His position on the throne of God provides for those who love and serve Him. We too can turn our world upside down for Jesus Christ. Indeed that is our calling.

But turning the world upside down for Christ requires that we guard and support each other, so that together we can fight the good fight of faith. And when we do, let us be humble, knowing we have only done what was commanded: our simple duty. The glory belongs to God.