

Homily for Monday in the Third Week after Pentecost

June 15, 2020

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year 2, Proper 6: 1 Kings 21:1–11a, 14–16; Psalm 5:1–6; Matthew 5:38–42*

We continue today to hear from the First Book of the Kings about the cruelty and evil done by King Ahab and his wife Jezebel. One notes that Ahab's sin, coveting the property of another— "You shall not covet thy neighbor's house, thou shall not covet thy neighbor's wife, nor his servant, nor his maid, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is his"—leads his wife to do murder, so that they may steal Naboth's vineyard. Things do not end well for Ahab and Jezebel—and many suffer because the king and his wife worshiped Baal and did not obey the commandments of God.

I want to move on to the gospel lesson. A week ago, we began to hear the Sermon on the Mount. We missed some of it because of the commemorations appointed for Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday. Before getting to today's lesson, I want to say that a closer reading of Ulrich Luz's commentary on this gospel has given me a new understanding of the section of this sermon where Jesus' begins, "You have

heard that it was said . . . But I say to you.”¹ Before these antitheses—opposites—begin,² Jesus said, “Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them.”³ With these words, Jesus reveals new dimensions of God’s will for his people. In Mark and Luke, Jesus speaks of the presence of the dominion of God; in Matthew, he speaks of the dominion of heaven. (Reminder: in New Testament Greek, “kingdom” is power, not a place.)

One might say, Jesus did not resist evil when he was beaten and nailed to a cross. Jesus did not resist when he was stripped of his cloak and his undergarment. In Mark, Matthew, and Luke, Simon of Cyrene is compelled to carry Jesus’ cross as Jesus walked to Golgotha. In John, Jesus himself walks and carries his cross there—in John, Jesus lays down his life and he lays it down of his own accord.

Before the legalization of Christianity at the beginning of the fourth century by Constantine, Christians could not be soldiers because they could not be killers. Professor Luz writes about this pre-Constantine

¹ Matthew 5:21–48.

² Matthew 5:21–48.

³ Matthew 5:17.

period: “Without exception, the literal interpretation of these verses dominated.”⁴ Tertullian, a North African theologian, probably a layperson, who died circa the year 225,⁵ for example, is willing to give away everything “as long as his faith is not threatened.”⁶ A century later, as the Roman Empire in the West is collapsing, pagans are excluded from the its army.⁷

Without going into a detailed explanation, I will quote Luz about the origins of a less rigorous interpretation: “The father of the “*moderating*” *interpretation* in both its Catholic and Protestant forms is Augustine” [of Hippo].⁸

Many have heard me say before, if there be a real philosophical—intellectual—challenge to my faith, it is the reality of evil. In Baton Rouge, I lived in a house, less than a mile from Saint Luke’s. Two doors from me, was an older couple who were parishioners and who were young adults during the Second World War. Once when I was at their home, some kind report on

⁴ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7: A Commentary*, trans. James E. Crouch, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2007), 277.

⁵ *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2ed. (New York: Oxford University Press 1978), s.v. “Tertullian,” 1352.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Luz, 279.

holocaust denial came across the television. He jumped up and turned off the TV. Forty years earlier he was in an army unit that entered a German concentration camp. He had no time to listen to nonsense about the evil he had witnessed.

I became a priest in 1983. Before the adoption of the 1979 Prayer Book, parishes like ours usually used *A Manual for Priests of the American Church*, published by the Society of Saint John the Evangelist, whose monastery is in Cambridge, Massachusetts, for blessings that weren't in the Prayer Book.

The traditional Western rite for confession had a blessing after the confession and absolution. This final Trinitarian blessing began, “May the Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ make whatsoever good thou hast done, or evil thou has endured, be unto you for the forgiveness of sins, the increase of grace, and the reward of eternal life.”⁹ My confessor in seminary always knew the prayer from the old days and always concluded with it. I do not understand evil and the terrible cruelty it visits on humankind, but I trust and

⁹ *A Manual for Priests of the American Church* (Cambridge: Society of Saint John the Evangelist, 1944), 23.

believe that eternal life lies ahead for all who have suffered evil in this life.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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