

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The 16th Sunday after Trinity
September 27, 2020

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Nobody taught like our Lord. On recent Sundays we have had gospels giving us splendid examples of His parables. This was a real blessing for the Lord's disciples. In parables the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven were made understandable to those open to the Truth and eager for it. There are occasions when Jesus used parables to convince His *adversaries*. He did this to make His criticism of them hit close to home. When it did, sometimes Christ's foes *reproved themselves*.

Using parables this way was what had inspired the Old Testament prophet Nathan. In his famous parable of the ewe lamb, Nathan convinced King David he had done wrong, not only in committing adultery, but in trying to cover it up. David had arranged to have Bathsheba's husband killed in battle. So there is such a thing as a *reproving parable*. Parables are not stories made for entertainment! Notice today that Christ wants an answer. He says to His hearers: "But what think ye?"

We have just heard about two types of persons. One proves better than he promises. The other promises better than he proves. You and I know both types! And the Divine verdict is clear. In both Old and New Testaments *actions speak louder than words*. Constantly the Lord says through His prophets: "I hate your sacrifices when you oppress the orphan and widow." Also fully revealed throughout the Scriptures is that Almighty God does not desire the death of a sinner but that he should turn from his sin and be saved.

In the first lesson today we heard from the great prophet Ezekiel. The Lord's parable validated Ezekiel, whose proclamation ran counter to the prevailing theory of group guilt. Ezekiel strongly insisted on *personal responsibility*. There had been an old proverb: "The fathers have eaten green grapes and the teeth of their children are set on edge." And this was taken as gospel truth. Ezekiel said *nonsense!* People's actions are their own. They cannot blame the outcome on family, environment, or on God. But people rejected Ezekiel and said "God's way are not fair." Men and women, whole societies and governments, have been saying that ever since! The business about green grapes is true to a point. Children *do* tend to accept the prevailing morality at home and around them. But it is a sobering gospel fact Almighty God made us free and expects us to act responsibly.

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Many years ago Dr. Karl Menninger wrote a book called *Whatever Became of Sin?* A sense of shame had become a rare commodity. Contemporary psychotherapy suggested there is something *wrong* with being ashamed. Hollywood said the Parable of the Prodigal Son needed a re-write. Better for the wayward son to go on a TV talk show and claim to have been victim of his environment! But Jesus did not craft His parable that way. In it the son said: “Father I have sinned against Heaven and before thee and am no more worthy to be called thy son.” The world recoils from such unvarnished confessions of guilt and says as it did long ago to Ezekiel: “God’s way is not fair.”

We cannot fall back on the prevailing mood of the times. We cannot claim “peer pressure.” Acting under orders didn’t work as an excuse for Adolf Eichmann, and it doesn’t work for us. We must abuse the notion that our thievery becomes a crime only when a judge and jury say so!

So where is the Gospel good news? The good news is that *God waits to be gracious*. Even when we begin in an unpromising way, yet when we repent and mend our ways Our Heavenly Father will accept us back, just as Our Lord taught in the great parable of the Prodigal Son. “The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some men count slackness; but is long-suffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.” (2 *Peter* 3:9) So blessed be God, in Whose covenant with us there is room for repentance, and the grace promised for the amendment of our ways.