

Lent III Sermon by Bishop Michael Hawkins

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He that is not with me is against me: and he that gathereth not with me scattereth.

The last state is worse than the first. Do you ever clean up, only to look around a day later at the new mess and think: it looks worse than ever, the last state is worse than the first. Whenever we clean up, whether dishes or diapers, studies or basements, we never really address the real problem. We will continue to have to struggle in a mess and occasionally tackle it, until we learn to put things away when we receive them. What we need, more than just a one-time clean up, is a change in the way we live and work, a change in disciplines and habits. This is as true of house-cleaning as it is of soul-cleaning. Part of the work of Lent is this sweeping and garnishing of our souls, in preparation for the living commemoration of Christ's death and resurrection. So let us hear the warning: the last state is worse than the first.

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If we give up chocolates and champagne for Lent and make it through the forty days with our record intact, we may approach Easter with a smug self-righteousness and self-satisfaction. And that is surely a last state which is far worse than the first. If you leave here today feeling a little better than all your family and neighbours, who are right now in bed or reading the paper in their housecoat with a cup of coffee, your last state is worse than the first.

We are confronted this morning by another hard saying of our Lord: Whoever is not with me is against me. Jesus equates mere tolerance of himself, and his work and mission, as open opposition. Neutrality is effective opposition. He interprets our indecisiveness and indifference in the worst possible light. And in that searing light, how can our lives escape judgment? We imagine that our inactivity, our lack of a position, our abstention, somehow keeps us innocent. But we forget that our sins of omission are the greatest. We confess first that we have left undone those things which we ought to have done. It is a clear sign of Christian spiritual maturity when those - our sins of omission - are recognized by our conscience to be more serious

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than our sins of commission. By toleration, even when that stems from ignorance, we are all guilty of an immeasurable weight of evil. By thoughtlessness, silence and inactivity, not thinking, not speaking, not doing - we are guilty, so very guilty. For in as much as we have not openly sided with Jesus Christ, and his truth and justice and love in all things, we stand and live against Christ. He that is not with me is against me.

Our Lord warns us today about what we should call spiritual indifference. There is no neutral ground here. You must either stand boldly with him, under him, beside him and for him - or you stand against him. You either gather with him, or you are his enemy, dividing and scattering.

That Gospel about spiritual indifference is matched by an Epistle which addresses moral indifference. Some of these early Christians were so confused about the assurance of salvation, that they mistakenly assumed that their moral conduct did not matter. This presumption is common still in the pulpit and in the pew, especially in our part of the world and of the Church, where we presume upon God's favour and goodness no matter what we do or how we live our lives. Instead, we are instructed

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to work out our salvation with fear and trembling. St. Paul reminds the Ephesian Christians and us: “Let no one deceive you with vain words, for because of these things cometh the wrath of God upon the children of disobedience. Be ye therefore not partakers with them.” In other words, Don’t let anyone trick you into moral indifference. What you do matters a lot, and God’s anger is poured out on those who disobey him. Just say no!

These two readings bring before us dire warnings against spiritual and moral indifference. We would do well to think about these, and to see them in ourselves. In our time lukewarmness passes for fiery devotion, and we have grown accustomed to drastically compromised standards of spiritual and moral discipline. But such carelessness about spiritual matters and moral matters will not be so well received by our Lord. Remember and never forget the words of Jesus to the Church in Laodicea: “I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot! So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth. For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need

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nothing; not knowing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked.”

While the mention of the seven more wicked spirits makes us think of the Seven Capital Sins, surely we must recognize two wicked spirits in self-righteousness and self-satisfaction, and in these we have a last state worse than the first.

In the words of Jesus before us today, you and I are described as a house and a palace. Our bodies and souls, our hearts and minds, these are abodes or dwelling places, and at issue is who shall abide in them. Jesus has come to liberate us from the tyranny of evil, but he comes as well to make us free members of his kingdom. Unless we accept his rule and authority, our taste of liberation will be short and fleeting, and the last state worse than the first.

Let us pray earnestly today to be spared the sins of self-righteousness and self-satisfaction. That God would open our eyes, to see and know ourselves as we truly are, to see and know his love and forgiveness in Jesus Christ, that we may wake up from spiritual and moral death. For too long, we have turned a blind eye and tuned a deaf ear to injustice, violence and hatred

Lent III Sermon by Bishop Michael Hawkins

around us, and within us. Remember he that is not with me is against me. We come to Christ aright only when we know that we are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked. But when we come as such, he gives us joy and mercy, riches, sight and clothing. We come with nothing to offer but broken hearts, yet this is what he wants. And our broken hearts may receive him, so that renewed in the love of Christ, we will walk in love as Christ has loved us. +