

SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYER¹
The Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity²

Lessons:³

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the eighth Verse of the seventeenth Chapter of the First Book of the Kings, commonly called the Third Book of the Kings.⁴

“And the word of the LORD came unto him, saying, Arise, get thee to Zarephath [**ZARR-ih-fath**], which belongeth to Zidon [**ZYE-dunn**], and dwell there: behold, I have commanded a widow woman there to sustain thee. ...

“And it came to pass after these things, that the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, fell sick; and his sickness was so sore, that there was no breath left in him. And she said unto Elijah, What have I to do with thee, O thou man of God? art thou come unto me to call my sin to remembrance, and to slay my son? And he said unto her, Give me thy son. And he took him out of her bosom, and carried him up into a loft, where he abode, and laid him upon his own bed. And he cried unto the LORD, and said, O LORD my God, hast thou also brought evil upon the widow with whom I sojourn, by slaying her son? And he stretched himself upon the child three times, and cried unto the LORD, and said, O LORD my God, I pray thee, let this child’s soul come into him again. And the LORD heard the voice of Elijah; and the soul of the child came into him again, and he revived. And Elijah took the child, and brought him down out of the chamber into the house, and delivered him unto his mother: and Elijah said, See, thy son liveth.

“And the woman said to Elijah, Now by this I know that thou art a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in thy mouth is truth.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the eleventh Verse of the seventh Chapter of the Gospel according to St. Luke.⁵

“And it came to pass the day after, that he went into a city called Nain; and many of his disciples went with him, and much people. Now

when he came nigh to the gate of the city, behold, there was a dead man carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow: and much people of the city was with her. And when the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her, and said unto her, Weep not. And he came and touched the bier: and they that bare him stood still. And he said, Young man, I say unto thee, Arise. And he that was dead sat up, and began to speak. And he delivered him to his mother. And there came a fear on all: and they glorified God, saying, That a great prophet is risen up among us; and, That God hath visited his people. And this rumour of him went forth throughout all Judaea, and throughout all the region round about.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “*And there came a fear on all: and they glorified God, saying, That a great prophet is risen up among us; and, That God hath visited his people.*” In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Homily:

The people’s reaction to the miracle in today’s Second Lesson, that is, to Jesus’ raising the dead man back to *this mortal* life (unlike His own resurrection to follow), has behind it the great Tradition of the Old Testament. The prophets spoke the word of God with power, power that changed things, such as Moses rolling back the waters of the Red Sea, or Elijah bringing down fire from Heaven to turn the hearts of the disobedient back again.⁶ The word of God came with such power as we see in the opening of Genesis, where all creation comes alive when God says, “let there be light”. The word of God comes with power, miraculous power. The word of God, in the mouth of a prophet, is powerful.⁷

The word for “power” in the Greek New Testament, that is also translated as “might” (as in “mighty”) in the third Chapter of St. Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians, is a word always associated with miracles. It is

δύναμις (*dynamis*), from which we get the word “dynamic”. The New Testament reveals that the Christian life is the life of power that comes from the Holy Spirit. It is a supernatural life that does not depend on mere human strength. It is the life of the Risen Christ imparted to us from the Holy Spirit by our baptism into Christ⁸ and to which we have access only by faith. This power converts our hearts to faith and obedience, and brings us to the knowledge of God. The word of God proclaimed in the Gospel contains this supernatural power of the Holy Spirit within it, because whenever and wherever the Gospel is proclaimed the Holy Spirit speaks to the hearts of believers and unbelievers alike,⁹ creating faith in unbelieving hearts as he convicts the world.¹⁰

We can approach this life in different ways. Ephesians tells us, as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, how we ought to approach this life, living here and now the life that draws its power from the life of the Risen Christ, and that is breathed within us by the Holy Spirit. Look at those powerful words of St. Paul, and ask yourself, honestly, if you find them meaningful, or completely hidden to you:

“... [T]hat he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might (δύναμις, dynamis) by his Spirit in the inner man; that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fullness of God.”¹¹

Is that how you approach each day? Do you begin your day in prayer, asking for this to be your experience throughout the day? Do you hear these words as hollow and meaningless, or do they entice you, in a good and healthy way, to know God better?

I do not mean to create the impression of a life that is always full of some kind of emotional high, nor do I underestimate the necessary times of dryness that mystics call “the dark night of the soul.” The life of faith faces the same setbacks and fears that affect all people everywhere. But, the life of faith perseveres, and is not overcome by this

world, because Christ Himself, the Risen and Glorified Lord, is its source, its goal and its hope. Only the Holy Spirit can give you this life, because it is not a man made commodity.

It begins each day by the honest recognition that we have sinned, and have not earned some right to know God. It begins in the honest light of humility that confesses, repents and asks forgiveness. The life of faith means that you receive that forgiveness because you understand that Christ has paid the full price for all your sins, that He did this when He poured out His soul unto death for you on the Cross,¹² and that through Him the Father welcomes you into His presence, fully justified because you are *in Christ*. Because you know this, by faith, you dare to ask for the grace of God that is brought to you by the Holy Spirit, and for the power to live in that grace, “... *to be strengthened with might (δύναμις, dynamis) by his Spirit in the inner man; that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith...*”

Because of this power and grace from the Holy Spirit, that God gives you breath by breath as you live in your own daily reality, you can love your neighbor with the love of God, even when your own power fails, “... *that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height...*”

You can give the love of Christ freely, because, freely, it has been given to you,¹³ “... *and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fullness of God.*” The life of faith is simple but not easy. It is powerful, but known only in weakness. St. Paul wrote to the Church in Corinth:

“And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.”¹⁴

What is the weakness in which Christ's power is made perfect in our own experience? It is when we have come to the end of our own power, and learn that we need His power. It is why I remind you, on the First Sunday after Trinity, that it is harder by far to *love thy neighbor* than it is to love some big impersonal thing we call "mankind". Our own weakness is evident in many ways, as it was for Peter, James and John who fell asleep, though they really *had* intended to watch with Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane. We know we ought not to fear death as others do, but we cannot live without some fear of it from time to time. We cannot forgive others as God forgives us, that is, we cannot forgive when we rely on the power of our emotions. I could go on and on, for there is much we cannot do.

The life we live is the life of faith, and it is the Sacramental life. When you approach God today it is with thanksgiving, hearing His word, confession of sin, receiving His forgiveness, and then actually partaking of the Food and Drink of Eternal Life by taking and eating, and by drinking, Christ's own Body and Blood as He gives Himself in the Sacrament. You need His grace, and ought to avail yourself of every means of grace. Seeing this need for what it is, requires the honest evaluation of humility. You need what He gives. He gives *Himself*; as he gave Himself on the Cross, he gives Himself through every means He has established, and by faith you receive Him. That is what His grace is—it is His own presence and power here and now.

But, beware of what St. Paul described in words he wrote to St. Timothy about some "... *having a form of godliness, but denying the power (δύναμις, dynamis) thereof: from such turn away.*"¹⁵

I hope that none of you think of this time spent in church as merely "a little religion" to distract you from real life. Real life is here, and real life is in Christ. The world offers many distractions, and those are the fantasy, the things that pass away. Eternity is forever (as much as that may sound like a Yogi Berra-ism). St. John said it better:

*“Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.”*¹⁶

You may approach the Christian life merely as religious duty, concerning which you have little conviction, about which you think, “let’s not get carried away.” You may think it enough to give God one hour each week (which is never a time limit we set on a service!), but then to live the rest of your time assuming that He will be satisfied with that, as if you gave Him something that He needed. God does not need an hour from you once a week, and He does not need a bit of your money, or a few hours from you on Holy Days. He does not need anything from you, and you cannot give Him anything.

You, however, *need* to give God as much attention as you can. You need to give what you can. You need to come here, you need to pray each day wherever you are, you need to hear His word (to read it), and you need to take the sacraments He offers. You need to obey His voice, and you need faith that is present moment by moment, day by day. The power that you need is a gift that is given, and that you need to receive every hour of your life. Do not hold a mere form of godliness if you are going to go out of here to deny the power thereof.

Instead, *“know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fullness of God.”*

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The Rev’d Robert Hart¹⁷
September 23, 2012

¹ “Any set of Psalms and Lessons appointed for the evening of any day may be read at the morning service, and any set of morning Psalms and Lessons may be read in the evening.” *Concerning the Service of the Church, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER* viii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

² This sermon was originally written on the propers for Holy Communion on the Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity, 2012.

³ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxxv (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

⁴ I Kings 17:8-9, 17-24 (KJV).

⁵ Luke 7:11-17 (KJV).

⁶ That is, to the fathers, or to the wisdom of the just; *cf.* I Kings 18:37, Malachi 4:5-6 & St. Luke 1:17.

⁷ *Cf.* Jeremiah 15:19 & Isaiah 55:11.

⁸ Romans 6:1ff.

⁹ “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.” Romans 1:16.

¹⁰ St. John 16:8.

¹¹ Ephesians 3:16-19 (KJV).

¹² Isaiah 53:12.

¹³ St. Matthew 10:8.

¹⁴ II Corinthians 12:7-9.

¹⁵ II Timothy 3:5.

¹⁶ I John 2:15-17.

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