

SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYERⁱ
SEXAGESIMA SUNDAY

Lessons:ⁱⁱ

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the eleventh Chapter of Ecclesiastes, or, the Preacher.ⁱⁱⁱ

“Cast thy bread upon the waters: for thou shalt find it after many days. Give a portion to seven, and also to eight; for thou knowest not what evil shall be upon the earth. If the clouds be full of rain, they empty themselves upon the earth: and if the tree fall toward the south, or toward the north, in the place where the tree falleth, there it shall be. He that observeth the wind shall not sow; and he that regardeth the clouds shall not reap. As thou knowest not what is the way of the spirit, nor how the bones do grow in the womb of her that is with child: even so thou knowest not the works of God who maketh all. In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thine hand: for thou knowest not whether shall prosper, either this or that, or whether they both shall be alike good.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the third Chapter of the Book of Daniel.^{iv}

“Nebuchadnezzar [**nebb-oo-kadd-NEZZ-arr**] the king made an image of gold, whose height was threescore cubits, and the breadth thereof six cubits: he set it up in the plain of Dura, in the province of Babylon. Then Nebuchadnezzar [**nebb-oo-kadd-NEZZ-arr**] the king sent to gather together the princes, the governors, and the captains, the judges, the treasurers, the counsellors, the sheriffs, and all the rulers of the provinces, to come to the dedication of the image which Nebuchadnezzar [**nebb-oo-kadd-NEZZ-arr**] the king had set up. Then the princes, the governors, and captains, the judges, the treasurers, the counsellors, the sheriffs, and all the rulers of the provinces, were gathered together unto the dedication of the image that Nebuchadnezzar [**nebb-oo-kadd-NEZZ-arr**] the king had set up; and they stood before the image that Nebuchadnezzar [**nebb-oo-kadd-NEZZ-arr**] had set up. Then an herald cried aloud, To you it is commanded, O people, nations,

and languages, That at what time ye hear the sound of the cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, dulcimer, and all kinds of musick, ye fall down and worship the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar [**nebb-oo-kadd-NEZZ-arr**] the king hath set up: And whoso falleth not down and worshippeth shall the same hour be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace. Therefore at that time, when all the people heard the sound of the cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, and all kinds of musick, all the people, the nations, and the languages, fell down and worshipped the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar [**nebb-oo-kadd-NEZZ-arr**] the king had set up.

“Wherefore at that time certain Chaldeans came near, and accused the Jews. They spake and said to the king Nebuchadnezzar [**nebb-oo-kadd-NEZZ-arr**], O king, live for ever. Thou, O king, hast made a decree, that every man that shall hear the sound of the cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, and dulcimer, and all kinds of musick, shall fall down and worship the golden image: And whoso falleth not down and worshippeth, that he should be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace. There are certain Jews whom thou hast set over the affairs of the province of Babylon, Shadrach [**SHADD-rack**], Meshach [**MEE-shack**], and Abednego [**ah-BEDD-nih-go**]; these men, O king, have not regarded thee: they serve not thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up.

“Then Nebuchadnezzar [**nebb-oo-kadd-NEZZ-arr**] in his rage and fury commanded to bring Shadrach [**SHADD-rack**], Meshach [**MEE-shack**], and Abednego [**ah-BEDD-nih-go**]. Then they brought these men before the king. Nebuchadnezzar [**nebb-oo-kadd-NEZZ-arr**] spake and said unto them, Is it true, O Shadrach [**SHADD-rack**], Meshach [**MEE-shack**], and Abednego [**ah-BEDD-nih-go**], do not ye serve my gods, nor worship the golden image which I have set up? Now if ye be ready that at what time ye hear the sound of the cornet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, and dulcimer, and all kinds of musick, ye fall down and worship the image which I have made; well: but if ye worship not, ye shall be cast the same hour into the midst of a burning fiery furnace; and who is that God that shall deliver you out of my hands? Shadrach [**SHADD-rack**], Meshach [**MEE-shack**], and Abednego [**ah-BEDD-nih-go**], answered and said to the king, O Nebuchadnezzar, we are not careful to answer thee in this matter. If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king. But if not, be it known unto thee, O

king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up.

“Then was Nebuchadnezzar [**nebb-oo-kadd-NEZZ-arr**] full of fury, and the form of his visage was changed against Shadrach [**SHADD-rack**], Meshach [**MEE-shack**], and Abednego [**ah-BEDD-nih-go**]: therefore he spake, and commanded that they should heat the furnace one seven times more than it was wont to be heated. And he commanded the most mighty men that were in his army to bind Shadrach [**SHADD-rack**], Meshach [**MEE-shack**], and Abednego [**ah-BEDD-nih-go**], and to cast them into the burning fiery furnace. Then these men were bound in their coats, their hosen, and their hats, and their other garments, and were cast into the midst of the burning fiery furnace. Therefore because the king’s commandment was urgent, and the furnace exceeding hot, the flames of the fire slew those men that took up Shadrach [**SHADD-rack**], Meshach [**MEE-shack**], and Abednego [**ah-BEDD-nih-go**]. And these three men, Shadrach [**SHADD-rack**], Meshach [**MEE-shack**], and Abednego [**ah-BEDD-nih-go**], fell down bound into the midst of the burning fiery furnace. Then Nebuchadnezzar [**nebb-oo-kadd-NEZZ-arr**] the king was astonished, and rose up in haste, and spake, and said unto his counsellors, Did not we cast three men bound into the midst of the fire? They answered and said unto the king, True, O king. He answered and said, Lo, I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire, and they have no hurt; and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God.

“Then Nebuchadnezzar [**nebb-oo-kadd-NEZZ-arr**] came near to the mouth of the burning fiery furnace, and spake, and said, Shadrach [**SHADD-rack**], Meshach [**MEE-shack**], and Abednego [**ah-BEDD-nih-go**], ye servants of the most high God, come forth, and come hither. Then Shadrach [**SHADD-rack**], Meshach [**MEE-shack**], and Abednego [**ah-BEDD-nih-go**], came forth of the midst of the fire.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the First Lesson: “Cast your bread upon the waters, for you will find it after many days.”^v In the Name of the Father, and of the ✕ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Homily:

These words, “Cast your bread upon the waters,” are among the most famous in all of Scripture. There are people who can quote them who barely perceive that they are, in fact, taken from the Bible; perhaps this is due to the picturesque images they call to mind. But we have all heard the lame jokes based upon them, such as “Cast your bread upon the waters, and it will return to you soggy.”

The whole theme of the passage that forms today’s First Lesson is one of taking risks, of launching out into the only partially known, of acting despite inescapably incomplete information. The two most profitable activities available to the ancient world were commerce and agriculture but each of those pursuits was rife with uncertainties and chances for failure.

As we learn from the Parable of the Sower, which is the Gospel appointed for Mass today, when a seed is planted, we have no guarantee whatever that it will result in a plant to be harvested. And, especially in those days, when a ship put to sea, there was no guarantee that it would return to its home port. And that was true up until comparatively recent times, as anyone knows who has visited those picturesque New England fishing and whaling ports, with their lovely white clapboard houses, each with its “widow’s walk” on the ridge of its roof.

Despite these uncertainties, the intelligent man ventures anyway,^{vi} acting as prudently as he can under the circumstances. He knows that to fail to act, as would the farmer who waited vainly for assurance as to the coming weather, is itself a choice, if a choice by default, only it is a choice that can never produce a profit. We can act or we can refuse to act, but that is the limit of our freedom of action. We simply do not have the choice to do neither the one nor the other.

So it is very possible that in this famous phrase, “your bread” really signifies “your means of livelihood”. Then “cast your bread upon the waters”,^{vii} would mean “take the risk of putting your fortune at the mercy of the seas”, as by engaging in overseas trade,^{viii} especially the vitally important but risky trade in grain.^{ix} In an age when all shipping was at the mercy of the wind and waves and no means of navigation

existed other than piloting by sight along the coastlines or, at night, finding North by the Pole Star, such trade gave rise to the phrase “act of God”^x for humanly foreseen catastrophes and sailors were the archetypes of daring adventurers.

If this mercantile figure of speech is what was actually intended by Quoheleth [**KOH-heh-lett**], the author of Ecclesiastes, then “Give a portion to seven, or even to eight, for you know not what evil may happen on earth”^{xi} may be a direction to “diversify your risks”,^{xii} in much the same way as did the travelling rich man who divided his fortune into portions which he entrusted to each of several servants in the Parable of the Talents.

Quoheleth [**KOH-heh-lett**], who might be better called “the Schoolmaster” or “the Teacher” rather than the traditional English title “the Preacher”, has an outlook that approaches a philosophical fatalism. God controls all that is in this world and man’s efforts cannot influence the forces of nature,^{xiii} whether they are the coming of the rains,^{xiv} the falling of a tree,^{xv} or the blowing of the winds.^{xvi} Therefore one who tries to outguess God, so as to plant only when there is no risk, will end up having planted nothing at all.^{xvii}

So people go on with their daily lives. A wise farmer plants, even though he cannot predict the wind.^{xviii} A husband and wife – at least an ancient Hebrew husband and wife -- do not know how their child is conceived and grows, but they nonetheless come together in love,^{xix} and frequently children are the result.

Conclusion:

The Teacher’s message is clear: life is full of uncertainties and we, as weak human beings, will never have as much information as we would like for our guidance. Those uncertainties and that ignorance cannot prevent us from living however, so wise men and women act as prudently as they can upon what they can know for certain, and for the rest, trust themselves and their futures to God.

In his way, Quoheleth [**KOH-heh-lett**] is reminiscent of that great 18th Century moral theologian, Benjamin Franklin, who observed, “The

Lord helps those who help themselves”, and also of another anonymous sage, who advised us, “Work as though everything depends on you and pray as though everything depends on God.”

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ⁱ “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 xvii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*

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

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ecclesiastes 11:1-6 (KJV).*

^{iv} *Daniel 3:1-26 (KJV).*

^v *Ecclesiastes 11:1 (RSV).*

^{vi} James L. Crenshaw, *Ecclesiastes*, in JAMES L. MAYS, ED., *HARPER'S BIBLE COMMENTARY 523* (HarperSanFrancisco 1988).

^{vii} *Ecclesiastes 11:1 (RSV).*

^{viii} HERBERT G. MAY AND BRUCE M. METZGER, EDS., *THE NEW OXFORD ANNOTATED BIBLE WITH THE APOCRYPHA, REVISED STANDARD VERSION 813 fn.* (Oxford University Press, 1977).

^{ix} G. S. Hendry, *Ecclesiastes*, in D. GUTHRIE AND J. A. MOTYER, EDS., *THE NEW BIBLE COMMENTARY REVISED, 3rd Ed.* 576 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970).

^x Cf. Hendry, *op. cit.*

^{xi} *Ecclesiastes 11:2 (RSV).*

^{xii} MAY AND METZGER, *op cit.* 813 fn.; Hendry, *op. cit.*

^{xiii} Harvey H. Guthrie, Jr., *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, in CHARLES M. LAYMON, ED., *THE INTERPRETER'S ONE-VOLUME COMMENTARY ON THE BIBLE 323* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987).

^{xiv} *Ecclesiastes 11:3a.*

^{xv} *Ecclesiastes 11:3b.*

^{xvi} *Ecclesiastes 11:4a.*

^{xvii} *Ecclesiastes 11:4b; Hendry, op. cit.*

^{xviii} Crenshaw, *op. cit.*

^{xix} Guthrie, *op cit.*

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