

Sermon for Morning Prayer

The Twentieth Sunday After Trinity

Lessons:

First Lesson: Here beginneth the fourth Verse of the ninth Chapter of Ecclesiastes, or, The Preacher.²

“For to him that is joined to all the living there is hope: for a living dog is better than a dead lion. For the living know that they shall die: but the dead know not any thing, neither have they any more a reward; for the memory of them is forgotten. Also their love, and their hatred, and their envy, is now perished; neither have they any more a portion for ever in any thing that is done under the sun. “Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart; for God now accepteth thy works. Let thy garments be always white; and let thy head lack no ointment. Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of the life of thy vanity, which he hath given thee under the sun, all the days of thy vanity: for that is thy portion in this life, and in thy labour which thou takest under the sun. Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the sixth Chapter of the Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Ephesians.

“Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right. Honour thy father and mother; (which is the first commandment with promise;) That it may be well with thee, and thou mayest live long on the earth. And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ; Not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart; With good will doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men: Knowing that whatsoever good thing any man doeth, the same shall he receive of the Lord,

whether he be bond or free. And, ye masters, do the same things unto them, forbearing threatening: knowing that your Master also is in heaven; neither is there respect of persons with him.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

“[H]e who is joined with all the living has hope. . . but the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward; but the memory of them is lost.” In the Name of the Father, and of the † Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Development:

Today’s First Lesson expresses a basic pessimism that seems foreign to our present way of thinking. Although the Preacher’s tone is more resigned than crass, so it is not quite “eat, drink, and be merry”, yet it would not be too inaccurate to summarize the message of this particular passage as something along the lines of “live life to the fullest, for after death there is nothing, and you will be forgotten”.

There is something here that seems distinctly non-Christian, for as Christians, we are taught to think of the end of earthly life not as the disappearance from all existence but in the terms of “the Four Last Things: Death, Judgement, Heaven, and Hell”. All of these clearly imply some important continuation of our existence after death; they merely caution us as to where, and under what conditions, we may spend that continued existence.

In today’s passage, by contrast, the Preacher definitely confronts the inevitability of Death, but he says nothing about Judgement, whether Particular or General; nothing about Heaven, and nothing about Hell. Instead, he writes as though death were simply the end of existence.

Our instinctive reaction was correct. The Preacher is, indeed, drawing a non-Christian picture of our situation at death. Or, where he was Jewish, perhaps it would be more accurate to say he draws a pre-Christian picture of our situation at death, for at the time he wrote, sometime between the Second and Fifth Centuries, B.C., the ancient Jews had not yet developed any concrete concept of the afterlife.

Indeed, Jewish notions about what happens after death were still in flux in Our Lord's lifetime. We see in Acts traces of their theological disputes, as when Paul very readily provoked a riot between the Pharisees, who believed in and taught the concepts of individual resurrection, angels, and spirits, and the Sadducees, who vociferously denied all of those beliefs.

The way to the future Christian belief about the afterlife was pointed, as in so many areas, by the Pharisees. Christianity teaches the resurrection, first of Our Lord and then of each Christian. We believe in angels and we affirm both that one of the Persons of the Trinity is the Holy Spirit but that an individual spirit is an essential component of each human being.

Not for us is the bland fatalism of the Preacher. One of the distinctive features Christ gave to His new Faith was Hope. The Old Testament contains scattered references to Hope, but it was the New Testament that raised this to an article of Faith. Thus: "For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience."

And: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope."

And again: "We always thank God . . . because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. . . ."

Conclusion:

This hope, the product of our faith in the saving work of Our Lord Jesus Christ, is one of Christianity's most fundamental features. Pagans live lives of desperation because they have no ground for hope. As Ecclesiastes showed us, the ancient Jews lived lives of at least quiet desperation because their Covenant dealt only with the issues of this life and left them, like their pagan neighbors, with no reason to hope for the future.

Only Christians, with their firm belief in a God-given afterlife, have equally firm reason to be hopeful even while they endure the trials and troubles of this present world. This is what lies behind one of our principal missionary watchwords:

“Always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you. . . .”

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*The Rev'd Canon John A. Hollister
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1 Psalms and Lessons for the Church Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxxvi (PECUSA 1928/1943).

2 Ecclesiastes 9:4-10 (KJV).

3 Ephesians 6:1-9 (KJV).

4 Ecclesiastes 9:4a, 5b (RSV).

5 Acts 23:6-10.

6 E.g., Psalms 16:9, 31:24; 33:18, 22; 38:15; 119:81; 130:7; 146:5; Proverbs 14:32; Jeremiah 17:7; Lamentations 3:24, 26; Joel 3:16.

7 Romans 8:24-25 (RSV).

8 Romans 15:13 (RSV).

9 Colossians 1:3a, 5a (RSV).

10 I Peter 3:15 (RSV).

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