

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER QUINQUAGESIMA SUNDAY

Lessons:¹

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the first Chapter of the Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach, or Ecclesiasticus.²

“All wisdom cometh from the Lord, and is with him for ever. Who can number the sand of the sea, and the drops of rain, and the days of eternity? Who can find out the height of heaven, and the breadth of the earth, and the deep, and wisdom? Wisdom hath been created before all things, and the understanding of prudence from everlasting. The word of God most high is the fountain of wisdom; and her ways are everlasting commandments. To whom hath the root of wisdom been revealed? or who hath known her wise counsels? [Unto whom hath the knowledge of wisdom been made manifest? and who hath understood her great experience?] There is one wise and greatly to be feared, the Lord sitting upon his throne. He created her, and saw her, and numbered her, and poured her out upon all his works. She is with all flesh according to his gift, and he hath given her to them that love him. The fear of the Lord is honour, and glory, and gladness, and a crown of rejoicing. The fear of the Lord maketh a merry heart, and giveth joy, and gladness, and long life. Whoso feareth the Lord, it shall go well with him at the last, and he shall find favor in the day of his death.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the fifth Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Matthew.³

“And seeing the multitudes, he went up into a mountain: and when he was set, his disciples came unto him: And he opened his mouth, and taught them, saying, Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be

comforted. Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled. Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God. Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.

“Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men. Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.”

Or,

Here beginneth the fourth Verse of the twelfth Chapter of the First Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians.⁴

“... Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God which worketh all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal. For to one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom; to another the word of knowledge by the same Spirit; To another faith by the same Spirit; to another the gifts of healing by the same Spirit; To another the working of miracles; to another prophecy; to another discerning of

spirits; to another divers kinds of tongues; to another the interpretation of tongues: But all these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally as he will. For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit. For the body is not one member, but many. If the foot shall say, Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? And if the ear shall say, Because I am not the eye, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling? But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him. And if they were all one member, where were the body? But now are they many members, yet but one body. And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you. Nay, much more those members of the body, which seem to be more feeble, are necessary: And those members of the body, which we think to be less honourable, upon these we bestow more abundant honour; and our uncomely parts have more abundant comeliness. For our comely parts have no need: but God hath tempered the body together, having given more abundant honour to that part which lacked. That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another. And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it. Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular. And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues. Are all apostles? are all prophets? are all teachers? are all workers of miracles? Have all the gifts of healing? do all speak with

tongues? do all interpret? But covet earnestly the best gifts: and yet shew [SHOW] I unto you a more excellent way.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the First Lesson:

“With him who fears the Lord, it will go well at the end; on the day of his death he will be blessed.”⁵

In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Homily:

Death is not one of those topics about which most of us want to hear. Considering it seriously is something most of us can put off almost indefinitely, usually right up until we are confronted with some incurable disease or other terminal medical condition. Preachers are no different than are other people, so it is not surprising that, outside funerals and memorial services, we do not hear very many sermons about death or about the things leading up to it.

The prophets of the Old Testament and of the Inter-Testamental Period do not seem to have been afflicted by any such mealy-mouthed shyness. They spoke boldly and fearlessly about the people and conditions they saw that needed recall, or remonstrance, or correction; they were, as we say, always ready to call a spade a blasted shovel. But that is the prime task of a prophet: to confront people with things they should be thinking about for themselves but which, out of ignorance, laziness, or pride, they have neglected. Perhaps that is also why prophets are very seldom popular people; they make no socialites’ “A” lists.

Today's First Lesson presents us with a seeming paradox. We are accustomed to think of fear as a purely gloomy, depressing emotion, so we are startled to read something such as:

“The fear of the Lord is glory and exultation,
and gladness and a crown of rejoicing.
The fear of the Lord delights the heart,
and gives gladness and joy and long life.”⁶

This seems like poetic exaggeration, the rhetorical figure of *synoeciosis* [*sinn-ih-SEE-ih-siss*] that pairs things that are utter opposites. After all, how can something as negative as fear be the cause of things as positive as glory, and exultation, and gladness, and rejoicing, and long life?

Yet Jesus ben Sirach was no Greek and so was no classical rhetor [**RETT-orr**]; he was an Hebrew scribe, that is, a professional teacher of the Old Testament law. So we must take seriously the possibility that, instead of employing some figurative mode of speech, he meant precisely what he said.

I think those apparent contradictions in today's First Lesson are in fact have be literal statements of truth. Further, I think those statements are grounded upon a robust concept of sin, which is another topic with which we are not wholly comfortable. But to explain why I think Jesus ben Sirach means what he writes, and why what he writes is implicitly about sin, let me make here a small digression into the nature of sin.

Sin, as we know, consists of doing those things that affront God and, therefore, tend to separate us from God. And that separation is always one-sided: God does not withdraw from us, for He is always ready to receive us. Instead; we withdraw from God because in some way we feel we have no need of Him.

Now I think you can very easily see the essential arrogance of that proposition: If we withdraw from God because we feel we have no need of Him, then we must feel, at least implicitly, that we are in some way equal to God. And when that is stated thus baldly, its utter pridefulness becomes inescapable.

Yet every sin contains within it that seed of pride. When we violate any of the prescriptions God has laid down for us, we are in effect saying that we do not need to abide by His commands. How can that conclusion be anything other than the result of our placing ourselves on a par with Him? Either He is the boss, so we obey Him, or we are equal to Him, so we have no need to obey Him.

So, in this way, every one of the Seven Deadly Sins⁷ that the Church teaches as prime illustrations of the concept of Sin can be reduced, in the end, to the Sin of Pride. Even when a sin is motivated by some natural force, such as Lust or Gluttony, it requires an act of Pride to disregard Our Lord's injunctions to chastity and prudence so as to overindulge in that natural inclination.

Now let us return from that little byway to our principal subject, which is ben Sirach's comments about the fear of the Lord. When we see that every sin can be analyzed as being the product of that cardinal sin of Pride, the Pride that tells us we are such special people that we do not have to follow God's wise rules for us, then we should be able also to see that the fear of God is what keeps that Pride in check.

Conclusion:

When we think we can do whatever we like and God either will not notice our transgressions, or will have no power to punish us for them, then we are under no restraints.

We give our fallen natures free rein to lead us wherever they will and that wherever always turns out to be someplace God very much wants us not to be.

On the other hand, when we realize that God will, in the end, punish our presumptuousness in disregarding His commandments, then we have a strong incentive to obey those very commandments. And that incentive may be just what we need to strengthen our faltering wills as they try desperately to listen to our weak, fallen natures which are prompting them into disobedience.

That is why ben Sirach tells us that the fear of the Lord is a force for good, something that will help us arrive before the Judgement seat with some prospect of surviving that Judgement:

“With him who fears the Lord, it will go well at the end;
on the day of his death he will be blessed.”⁸

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The Rev'd Canon John A. Hollister⁹
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¹ *An Alternative Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised in 1928)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER, WITH THE ADDITIONS AND DEVIATIONS PROPOSED IN 1928 34 (Canterbury Press 2008); *The Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised In 1928)*, A BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxvi (South Africa 1954); *A Table of Lessons (authorized by the Episcopal Synod)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxiv (CIPBC 1963).

² *Ecclesiasticus* 1:1-13 (KJV).

³ St. Matthew 5:1-16 (KJV).

⁴ I Corinthians 12:4-end (KJV).

⁵ *Ecclesiasticus* 1:13 (RSV).

⁶ *Ecclesiasticus* 1:11-12 (RSV).

⁷ Pride, Anger, Envy, Covetousness, Gluttony, Lust, Sloth.

⁸ *Ecclesiasticus* 1:13 (RSV).

⁹ Priest Assistant, Christ Anglican Catholic Church, Metairie LA; Honorary Canon, the Diocese of the Resurrection; Honorary Canon and Canon to the Ordinary, The Diocese of New Orleans, The Anglican Catholic Church.