

SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYER¹
The Eleventh Sunday after Trinity²

Lessons:³

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the fifth Chapter of the Book of Ecclesiastes, or, the Preacher.⁴

“Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God, and be more ready to hear, than to give the sacrifice of fools: for they consider not that they do evil. Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few. For a dream cometh through the multitude of business; and a fool’s voice is known by multitude of words. When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it; for he hath no pleasure in fools: pay that which thou hast vowed. Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay. Suffer not thy mouth to cause thy flesh to sin; neither say thou before the angel, that it was an error: wherefore should God be angry at thy voice, and destroy the work of thine hands? For in the multitude of dreams and many words there are also divers vanities: but fear thou God.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the ninth Verse of the eighteenth Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Luke.⁵

“... And he spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess. And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sin-

ner. I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “Every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.”⁶ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Homily:

God’s grace is His unexpected and unmerited favor toward us. When not given in vain—when we cooperate with it—we can pass over from “low to high.”

Esther is a Jewess of the dispersion who becomes the Queen of Persia and saves her people from a *pogrom*. Esther’s story shows that humility is attractive, and that pride is destructive. Her older cousin, Mordecai, is a Jew in Persia who serves the pagan King Ahasuerus loyally and humbly.

Mordecai was able to save the King during a conspiracy. At this point in the story, no one knows that Esther is Jewish. And things start to go badly for the Jews with the introduction of Haman, an exalted prince in the Court, who wants everyone literally to bow down before him. As a faithful Jew, Mordecai does not comply. So Haman seeks to destroy all the Jews in Persia.

The King does not know that his Queen, Esther, is Jewish, so he goes along with the *pogrom*. Esther is brave and decides to risk her life for her people, and expose the plot to the King. She gets as many Jews as possible to pray and fast on her behalf. She wins the King’s favor and sets up a dinner with the King and Haman. Haman is even more vaunted when he hears that he will

dine with the King. But Mordecai wears so badly on his nerves that Haman and his wife build a gallows on which to hang Mordecai.

Just before the dinner, the King is reading his official diary, which tells of Mordecai's loyalty and how he blew the whistle on the conspiracy against the King. The King instructs Haman to honor Mordecai. Later, at the banquet, Esther reveals to the King Haman's wicked plot against the Jews. In a fury the King instructs that Haman be hanged on the gallows he built for Mordecai. The humble courtier, Mordecai, is then highly honored by the King, and the Jewish people are able to overcome their persecutors.

The theme of the humble exalted and the high looks of the proud brought low is a familiar one in the Bible. Job, ruined by misfortune and disease, said, "though he slay me, yet will I trust him," and ends up having a direct experience of God's presence. Mary the lowly handmaiden from Nazareth, becomes Our Lady, the Queen of Heaven. Of the two men in the temple, the humble man went home not only forgiven, but justified. Jesus, from the Cross and the harrowing of hell rises to cosmic enthronement. St. Paul goes from being the greatest persecutor of Christians to the greatest proponent of the Gospel, *the* Apostle

In every case, God's grace, God's unexpected and unmerited favor, was given, and not given in vain, but cooperated with by its recipient.

Life, and all history, are like cones placed point to point, like an hourglass. But the point of the funnel, which we have to go through to get to the other cone, appears infinitely small. That point, where the cones meet, is the Cross of Christ, that opens out to the Resurrection

To go forward in life, we so often are called to do what feels like dying. We go from low to high. God's Kingdom is full of these amazing paradoxes: pouring out and self-giving lead to

glory. We speak of falling in love, which lifts us up. To be lost in love, in God is to be completely found. Humility is what exalts. The publican goes home not only forgiven, but justified. Spiritual warfare leads to inner peace. To be a slave of Christ, like St. Paul, brings total, perfect freedom. Letting go gives rise to ultimate fulfillment. Obscurity and littleness, as in the case of so many saints, can lead to great fame.

The barren woman conceives a child: Hannah, the mother of Samuel, and Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist. With Mary, virginity becomes ultimate fruitfulness. Wounding may be the precursor to healing. Death becomes the Passover to life. All of these transformations come from God's grace: St. Paul said, "by the grace of God I am what I am...." Whatever is improved, or good or true or successful comes by God's grace. At the point where God is all in all—the point where He gets all the glory—we finally become ourselves, we finally have faces, we become persons in the person of the Son.

So we are to appreciate how even humblest tasks are part of the "sacrament of the present moment"—the Holy Spirit is using every moment, every incident, every hardship, every chastening, every relationship, to capture you and set you free.⁷ Job tells us, "despise not the chastening of the Almighty, for He wounds, but He binds up; He smites, but His hands heal."⁸ Isaiah writes, "they poured out a prayer when thy chastening was upon them.... [T]hy dead shall live, their bodies shall rise."⁹

Therefore, offer up everything, especially what tries us, chastens us, humbles us. We offer up our sufferings, our sorrows, to be united with Jesus' perfect sacrifice on the Cross. "Offer it up" to be used redemptively for someone, some cause. Prayer sets the nail, fasting and suffering drives it home.

Then in the course of our day, with its ups and downs, there are arrow prayers, short, one line prayers, that are like arrows shot from a bow to pierce the heavens. Ecclesiasticus says, "The prayer of the humble pierces the clouds... and the Lord will

not delay."¹⁰ The publican's arrow prayer in today's Gospel is "God be merciful to me a sinner."

The Orthodox "Jesus Prayer" is a spin-off of this: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." This can be said slowly, over and over again. We can offer up whatever we are going through, with the Jesus Prayer, an arrow prayer, a petition, a confession, an intercession, an act of praise, or a thanksgiving. "Offer it up" so that God can work *redemptively* in our circumstances. What is lowly, He can exalt, and what is down, He can lift up.

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The Rt. Rev'd Paul C. Hewett¹¹
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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 Gospel for Holy Communion on the Eleventh Sunday after Trinity, 2012.

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

⁴ Ecclesiastes 5:1-7 (KJV).

⁵ St. Luke 18:9-14 (KJV).

⁶ St. Luke 18:14 (KJV).

⁷ Jean Pierre de Caussade, 18th-Century Jesuit, *Abandonment to Divine Providence*.

⁸ Job 5: 8-18 (KJV).

⁹ Isaiah 26:12-16, 19 (KJV).

¹⁰ *Ecclesiasticus* 35:10-19 (KJV).

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