
SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER
The Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity

³ St. Luke 17:5-10 (KJV).

⁴ I Chronicles 29:14.

⁵ THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

⁶ Hosea 6:3.

⁷ Bishop Ordinary, The Diocese of the Holy Cross.

Lessons:¹

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the tenth Verse of the twenty-ninth Chapter of the First Book of the Chronicles.²

“Wherefore David blessed the LORD before all the congregation: and David said, Blessed be thou, LORD God of Israel our father, for ever and ever. Thine, O LORD, is the greatness, and the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty: for all that is in the heaven and in the earth is thine; thine is the kingdom, O LORD, and thou art exalted as head above all. Both riches and honour come of thee, and thou reignest over all; and in thine hand is power and might; and in thine hand it is to make great, and to give strength unto all. Now therefore, our God, we thank thee, and praise thy glorious name. But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able to offer so willingly after this sort? for all things come of thee, and of thine own have we given thee. For we are strangers before thee, and sojourners, as were all our fathers: our days on the earth are as a shadow, and there is none abiding. O LORD our God, all this store that we have prepared to build thee an house for thine holy name cometh of thine hand, and is all thine own. I know also, my God, that thou triest the heart, and hast pleasure in uprightness. As for me, in the uprightness of mine heart I have willingly offered all these things: and now have I seen with joy thy people, which are present here, to offer willingly unto thee.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

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

“... And the apostles said unto the Lord, Increase our faith. And the Lord said, If ye had faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye might say unto this sycamine tree, Be thou plucked up

by the root, and be thou planted in the sea; and it should obey you. But which of you, having a servant plowing or feeding cattle, will say unto him by and by, when he is come from the field, Go and sit down to meat? And will not rather say unto him, Make ready wherewith I may sup, and gird thyself, and serve me, till I have eaten and drunken; and afterward thou shalt eat and drink? Doth he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I trow not. So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the First Lesson: “[A]ll things come of thee, and of thine own have we given thee.”⁴ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Sermon:

Today’s Old Testament lesson from First Chronicles has two of our favorite offertory sentences, the one just quoted above, and the one that begins, “Thine, O Lord, is the greatness, and the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty.” They are part of King David’s farewell prayer and his last words to his son, Solomon. He is instructing his son: “search out the commandments... get to know the God of your fathers.”

David goes over some blueprints for the Temple that Solomon is to build, and David weighs out a lot of gold for the appointments in the future Temple. He makes a large personal contribution with these words to Solomon: “be strong and courageous, and get to work.” David’s last words are “Give praise to the Lord your God!” Solomon is then invested as King.

The New Testament was written by men facing persecution and death. Yet the New Testament is supersaturated with outbursts of thanksgiving. St. Paul says in I Thessalonians 5, “in everything give thanks.” The well-known hymn “Now thank we all our God,” was composed by Martin Rinkart after a terrible period of war, famine and pestilence. Rinkart buried so many plague victims that he should have been morbid. But instead, walking in the Spirit, he wrote that hymn of praise.

The Church lives in thanksgiving. It is the air she breathes. In that thanksgiving, in that service, in that liturgy, lies our freedom. Each time the Eucharist is offered, we see that the salvation of the world is complete. All is fulfilled, all is granted. Man is now restored to where God placed him; he is restored to his vocation, to offer God a reasonable service, to know Him, to thank Him, to worship Him in Spirit and in Truth.

The Eucharist is our dress rehearsal for heaven; heaven itself, intimacy and trust with God. We need not, therefore, fear death, but see it as our heavenly birthday, our Passover with Christ into the light and joy of the Kingdom, rehearsed hundreds of times at every Eucharist. Each of us is to pray for a holy death, and the saints will be praying for us when that time comes. So it is that we ask Mary, the Queen of saints, to pray for us now, and at the hour of our death.

May our last moments on this earth be an outpouring of praise and thanksgiving for God’s wondrous ways with us.

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The Rt. Rev’d Paul C. Hewett⁷
September 9, 2012

¹ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxxii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

² I Chronicles 29:10-17 (KJV).

in his lap. Her father enjoyed her just as much asleep on his lap as when she was awake talking with him. And the Lord said, “it is the same with me.”

Therese died at the age of 24 and is known as the greatest saint of the 20th century. Even when she was asleep in the chapel, she was growing in holiness! Just as you cannot go outside in the pouring rain without getting wet, neither can you come into the presence of the Blessed Sacrament without getting spiritually wet and growing in the very life and holiness of the Lord Himself. This is why Scripture says “He will come to us like the rain; like spring rain that waters the earth.”⁶ Her last words were uttered in ferocious pain, “Oh, how I love Him.”

In the perspective of the late Alexander Schmemmann, the great Russian Orthodox theologian, the Eucharist reveals that our salvation is now complete. After the darkness of sin and the Fall and death, a man, Christ, once again offers to the Father the perfect thanksgiving: He *is* the perfect thanksgiving, the utterly dependent and obedient Son, the perfect Adam, the One to Whom everything is given and the One who returns everything back, even His Body and His Blood.

His Kingdom is His Father’s love for Him, and His love of the Father, and the Holy Spirit’s gift of that love to the faithful.

To return thanks to Him for this unspeakable gift—this gift that utterly shatters us, dazzles us, cleanses and completely heals and restores us—to return thanks is the experience of Paradise, the fullness of knowledge and freedom. To know God is to thank Him; to be free is to thank Him. In English, the word “think” and “thank” are closely related. To be thoughtful is to be thankful.

In the Eucharist we learn how to love through, and beyond, tragedy. In the Eucharist we learn how to return to our heavenly Father some of the love with which He loves us.

On the day we die, we return ourselves to God for the last time. The prayer that opens up the ST. AUGUSTINE’S PRAYER BOOK says, “Remember O Christian Soul, that thou hast this day, and every day of thy life, God to glorify. Jesus to imitate. A soul to save. A body to mortify. Sins to repent of. Virtues to acquire. Hell to avoid. Heaven to gain. Eternity to prepare for. Time to profit by. Neighbours to edify. The world to despise. Devils to combat. Passions to subdue. Death, perhaps, to suffer. Judgment to undergo.”

Priests are taught to say each Mass as though it were their last. Laymen are taught to live each day as though it were their last. The day we die is our heavenly birthday, our birthday into eternity, the finish line in a race. So we do not want to take today for granted. The first psalm in Morning Prayer, Psalm 95, jolts us every day with the word “today.”

“Today, if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts...” We don’t want to take anything for granted, whether it is the morning coffee, or having toothpaste, or hot water, or a ray of sunshine on the wall, or a smile. As soon as the morning alarm goes off we can get started right! We can say, from Psalm 118, “This is the day which the Lord hath made, let us rejoice and be glad in it.”

There is a tradition of paying close attention to a Christian’s last words, and of seeing special significance in them. Deathbed prayers like King David’s are significant. We want to finish well. Our Lady’s last recorded words in Scripture are “do whatever he tells you.” Our Lord’s last words in the Bible are “Behold, I come quickly.” St. Lawrence as he was being martyred and roasted alive, said, “I’m done on this side, you can turn me over now.” St. Nicholas recited the *Nunc Dimittis*. St. Clare exclaimed, “God, I thank you for creating me.” St. Catherine of Siena’s final prayer was “My God, I love you.” Stonewall Jackson is famous for his last words, “Let us cross over the river, and rest under the shade of the trees.” Patton’s last word was “Papa.”

The Fathers want us to remember our death often, not in a morbid way, but as an aid in uprooting the passions, the works of the flesh. Christian remembrance of death is not morbid because Jesus' death is the destruction of death. Death is now the Passover to eternal life. We learn from our Epistle today that we are to crucify the flesh—put to death the old man—to open way for the Holy Spirit, and the fruits of the Spirit. We are, for example, to let the Holy Spirit work an exchange in us, from lust to joy. Remembrance of death focuses the mind and squeezes more thanksgiving out of us, so that we savour God's gifts.

As children we were taught to chew our food slowly. We are to savour and enjoy what we eat. That tends towards gratitude and gracious living. One aspect of walking in the Spirit, which St. Paul enjoins in his Epistle to the Galatians, is being joyful, returning thanks to God. The Gospel today is about the Samaritan leper who was healed and returned to give thanks, the grateful Samaritan. He was made more completely whole by his gratitude.

It goes without saying that we sometimes feel blue. Being down is part of the human condition. We can then thank God for breath, for breathing. Psalm 119 has a verse which goes, "I opened my mouth, and drew in my breath, for my delight was in thy commandments." In our prayers, and in the Liturgy, the Holy Spirit is leading us not to give up petition or intercession but to place more emphasis on thanksgiving and praise. One of the excellent prayers of thanksgiving in our Prayer Book is on p. 591. The great classic is at the end of Morning and Evening Prayer, on page 19.⁵ The Thanksgiving we say after Holy Communion has been described as the greatest prose ever composed in English, and theologically it is a masterpiece.

The word Eucharist is of course Greek for "thanksgiving." In this Service we return thanks to God, in the way Our

Lord directed us to do so. And by giving thanks we put something back, we're not just living off the moral capital of our forbears. What we put back, He gave to us in the first place, as King David recognized. "All things come of thee, and of thine own have we given thee." It's like that at Christmas for children. The presents they make for their parents came from what the parents gave them. The big thing we have to thank God for is what His Son does for us, in making available to us all the benefits of His life, death, Resurrection, and Ascension.

These benefits are available to us in the Holy Spirit, who brings heaven to us, and us to heaven. The Holy Spirit shows us that our salvation is complete in Christ. We are living the new life of the new age in the new creation. This is so amazing and overwhelming that we use the Hebrew word "alleluia" before the Gospel. "Alleluia" is a mysterious word that connotes excitement, enthusiasm and gratitude. It is Hebrew for "praise Yahweh," or "praise the Lord." The Eucharist is a school of thanksgiving.

When it rains and you go outside, you get soaking wet. Devotion to our Lord in the Eucharist—time spent with Jesus in this Sacrament—is the surest way to sanctification. Jesus Himself said that His heart in the Blessed Sacrament is a fountain flowing with living waters, and He cried out for everyone to come to Him. Each time we come to him we are sanctified. Each moment in the Liturgy deepens our union with Christ.

St. Therese of Lisieux, from late 19th century France, is proof of this. She became discouraged because she would fall asleep during her holy hour in the Presence of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. Since she had joined the Carmelite Convent to give herself to prayer and the contemplative life, she was tempted to leave because she thought she was a total failure.

Then the Lord impressed upon her a memory of what her father said to her as a little girl, when she would fall asleep