

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER
The Third Sunday after Easter

Lessons:¹

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the fifteenth Verse of the twelfth Chapter of the Second Book of Samuel, otherwise called, The Second Book of the Kings.²

“... And the LORD struck the child that Uriah’s wife bare unto David, and it was very sick. David therefore besought God for the child; and David fasted, and went in, and lay all night upon the earth. And the elders of his house arose, and went to him, to raise him up from the earth: but he would not, neither did he eat bread with them. And it came to pass on the seventh day, that the child died. And the servants of David feared to tell him that the child was dead: for they said, Behold, while the child was yet alive, we spake unto him, and he would not hearken unto our voice: how will he then vex himself, if we tell him that the child is dead? But when David saw that his servants whispered, David perceived that the child was dead: therefore David said unto his servants, Is the child dead? And they said, He is dead. Then David arose from the earth, and washed, and anointed himself, and changed his apparel, and came into the house of the LORD, and worshipped: then he came to his own house; and when he required, they set bread before him, and he did eat. Then said his servants unto him, What thing is this that thou hast done? thou didst fast and weep for the child, while it was alive; but when the child was dead, thou didst rise and eat bread. And he said, While the child was yet alive, I fasted and wept: for I said, Who can tell whether GOD will be gracious to me, that the child may live? But now he is dead, wherefore should I fast? can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the fourteenth Chapter of the Gospel According to St. John.³

“Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also. And whither I go ye know, and the way ye know. Thomas saith [SETH] unto him, Lord, we know not whither thou goest; and how can we know the way? Jesus saith [SETH] unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me. If ye had known me, ye should have known my Father also: and from henceforth ye know him, and have seen him. Philip saith [SETH] unto him, Lord, shew [SHOW] us the Father, and it sufficeth us. Jesus saith [SETH] unto him, Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known me, Philip? he that hath seen me hath seen the Father; and how sayest thou then, Shew [SHOW] us the Father? Believest thou not that I am in the Father, and the Father in me? the words that I speak unto you I speak not of myself: but the Father that dwelleth in me, he doeth the works. Believe me that I am in the Father, and the Father in me: or else believe me for the very works’ sake. Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go unto my Father. And whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If ye shall ask any thing in my name, I will do it.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the

“Go with us, O heavenly Father, into the world. Mold us, make us, and shape us into the Image of Christ, that men may take notice that we have been with Jesus, and so join with us in thy house to praise His holy Name, who died and rose again for us, thy Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”

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The Rev’d Canon John A. Hollister¹⁶
April 21, 2013.

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

² II Samuel 12:15b-23 (KJV).

³ St. John 14:1-14 (KJV).

⁴ St. John 14:10b-11 (RSV).

⁵ In European usage, “Evangelical” usually means “Lutheran”.

⁶ In that same context, “Reformed” is usually code for “Calvinist”.

⁷ *Cf. Article XII Of Good Works, Articles of Religion*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 605 (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

⁸ Here, “evangelical” is used in the sense of “spreading the Gospel”.

⁹ St. Matthew 11:27; St. John 1:18, 6:46; Acts 4:12.

¹⁰ HERBERT G. MAY & BRUCE M. METZGER, eds., THE NEW OXFORD ANNOTATED BIBLE WITH THE APOCRYPHA, REVISED STANDARD VERSION 1308 fn. 4-7 & 8-11 (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1977).

¹¹ Hebrews 1:1-2 (RS).

¹² BENEDICT XVI, THE WORD OF THE LORD: *VERBUM DOMINI*, Art. 11 (Boston, MA: Pauline Books and Media 2010), quoting BENEDICT XVI, ENCYCLICAL LETTER *DEUS CARITAS EST*, 1: AAS 98 (2006), 217-218.

¹³ BENEDICT XVI, *VERBUM DOMINI*, Art. 6, quoting SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, *DEI VERBUM*, 2.

¹⁴ PAUL VI, APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION *EVANGELII NUNTIANDI* (December 8, 1975): AAS 68 (1976), 20.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

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3. Our knowledge of Jesus's words and works.

As to how we come to knowledge of Jesus through His words, Pope Benedict XVI has written about how “the unseen God ‘from the fullness of his love, addresses men and women as his friends, and lives among them, in order to invite and receive them into his own company.’”¹³ In other words, Scripture, the reliable record of Jesus's words, is God's side of an ongoing dialogue with us.

However, very few of the world's people will seek out the Scriptures from pure intellectual curiosity. Even if a few do so, those Scriptures will have little meaning to them when encountered in a vacuum. It is when people are the recipients of what Pope Paul VI called “the witness of life”¹⁴ that they become open to hearing what he termed “the word of life”.¹⁵

Conclusion:

At the risk of making a pun about the Gospel as “the Good News”, I must tell you this business of “the witness of life” is a classic “good news/bad news” situation. The “good news” is that all of us *can*, with God's grace, give to the world that “witness of life”. But the capacity to do something is not the same thing as is actually performing it.

So the counterbalancing “bad news” is that, unless we so dedicate ourselves that our personal and Church lives *do* give that witness, the world will not see Jesus in us and so will not be drawn to Him. Thus we must both recognize this truth and pray for strength to abide by it, for which there are no better words than those of the late, and saintly, Archbishop Michael Dean Stephens, which many of our parishes use as a closing “choir prayer” at the end of each Eucharist:

Father and the Father in me; or else believe me for the sake of the works themselves.”⁴ In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Introduction:

One of the great issues over which the Reformation was fought was the role that *works* play, or do not play, in our salvation. By the end of the Middle Ages, the Roman Catholic beliefs in Purgatory, the Treasury of Merits, and Indulgences had become, at least in popular piety if not in official Church doctrine, the notion that if we perform the proper physical acts here on earth, that is, if we engage in “good works”, then those works may engage God's favor and so “earn” us a better chance at salvation.

The Reformation actually began when a university professor of New Testament, outraged by the blatant sale of indulgences—in part to fund the building of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome—excoriated the practice and, in so doing, developed his own counter doctrine of salvation “solely by faith”. This became one of the great hallmarks of Evangelical⁵ and Reformed⁶ belief.

Theme:

Thus to us, living as we do after the life and work of that particular professor—who was named Martin Luther—the word “works” tends to make us shy away. This is because any reference to “works” automatically brings to mind that dispute which seems so close to us but which actually arose a millennium and a half after the last of the New Testament books was written.

If we reflect for a moment on that fact of chronology, then we easily see that any references to “works” that we find within the New Testament itself can have no real relationship to those later theological squabbles.

Instead, when our Lord refers to “works”, He is indicating something else entirely. That something is not *our* acts that are intended to please God but Jesus’s *own* acts, which are intended to get our attention and elicit our understanding of Him. Our acts have no saving function whatever unless they are the product, the fruit, of our faith in Him but His⁷ have an evangelical⁸ and apologetic function toward us. His own teachings, acts, miracles, and other behaviors, and those of His immediate followers, are intended to convince non-Christians of the truth of the Christian religion and its claims.

Development:

For ere any individual person can become a Christian, he or she must be convinced of the truths that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, that this Son came to earth to save mankind’s souls, and that following the Son is the only reliable path to God. Notice that I said “individual person”, because no one is born a Christian. Instead, every Christian is “re-born” as one, that is, must undergo the process of conversion and initiation for himself or herself, coming to know and to believe in Christ and then accepting that Christ as Savior.

1. Our knowledge of God.

In this process, the Gospel accounts are critical witnesses to Who Jesus is and to what He did while He was present among us on earth. That is the very reason that the Gospels were first written down: the original generation of Apostles and disciples spread the Church throughout the known world by word of mouth, based on their own personal testimonies. But as that original generation began to die off, it realized the necessity for preserving its personal witness to Christ’s life and work and so that witness was written down and became the core of our New Testament.

The testimony of this New Testament *corpus* is that access to God is solely through Jesus⁹ and knowledge of Jesus comes solely through Jesus’s *person*, the *words*, and the *works*.¹⁰

2. Our knowledge of Jesus’s person.

Since Jesus’s Ascension, our knowledge of His person comes to us primarily through the Sacraments and through Scripture. Thus the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews wrote, “In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.”¹¹

To put this matter another way, God’s ultimate revelation of Himself to us took place in the Incarnation of God the Son. As the great theologian, Pope *Emeritus* Benedict XVI, has put it:

“The eternal Word, expressed in creation and communicated in salvation history, in Christ became a man, ‘born of a woman’ (*Gal* 4:4). Here the word finds expression not primarily in discourse, concepts, or rules. Here we are set before the very person of Jesus. His unique and singular history is the definitive word which God speaks to humanity. We can see, then, why ‘being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a definitive direction.’ ... We are speaking of an unprecedented and humanly inconceivable novelty: ‘the Word became flesh and dwelt among us’ (*Jn* 1:14a).”¹²