

Sermon for Morning Prayer
The First Sunday in Lent

Lessons:¹

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

“My son, if thou come to serve the Lord, prepare thy soul for temptation. Set thy heart aright, and constantly endure, and make not haste in time of trouble. Cleave unto him, and depart not away, that thou mayest be increased at thy last end. Whatsoever is brought upon thee take cheerfully, and be patient when thou art changed to a low estate. For gold is tried in the fire, and acceptable men in the furnace of adversity. Believe in him, and he will help thee; order thy way aright, and trust in him. Ye that fear the Lord, wait for his mercy; and go not aside, lest ye fall. Ye that fear the Lord, believe him; and your reward shall not fail. Ye that fear the Lord, hope for good, and for everlasting joy and mercy. Look at the generations of old, and see; did ever any trust in the Lord, and was confounded? or did any abide in his fear, and was forsaken? or whom did he ever despise, that called upon him? For the Lord is full of compassion and mercy, longsuffering, and very pitiful, and forgiveth sins, and saveth in time of affliction. Woe be to fearful hearts, and faint hands, and the sinner that goeth two ways! Woe unto him that is fainthearted! for he believeth not; therefore shall he not be defended. Woe unto you that have lost patience! and what will ye do when the Lord shall visit you? They that fear the Lord will not disobey his Word; and they that love him will keep his ways. They that fear the Lord will seek that which is well, pleasing unto him; and they that love him shall be filled with the law. They that fear the Lord will prepare their hearts, and humble their souls in his sight, Saying, We will fall into the hands of the Lord, and not into the hands of men: for as his majesty is, so is his mercy.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the fourteenth Verse of the seventh Chapter of the Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Romans.³

“For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin. For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I. If then I do that which I would not, I consent unto the law that it is good. Now then it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not. For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do. Now if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me. For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “We know that the law is spiritual; but I am carnal, sold under sin.”⁴ In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

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

² *Ecclesiasticus* 2:1-18 (KJV).

³ Romans 7: 14-25 (KJV).

⁴ *Ibid.* 7: 14 (RSV).

⁵ *E.g.*, Genesis 1: 10b, 12b, 18b, 21b, 25b.

⁶ *Ibid.* 1: 31a (RSV).

⁷ Acts 10: 13-15.

⁸ Genesis 3: 1-21.

⁹ Romans 7: 15 (RSV).

¹⁰ Romans 7: 24-25b (RSV).

¹¹ Assisting Priest, Christ Anglican Catholic Church, Metairie LA. Honorary Canon, the Diocese of the Resurrection, and Honorary Canon and Canon to the Ordinary, The Diocese of New Orleans, The Anglican Catholic Church.

Conclusion:

That is what St. Paul meant when he lamented that “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.”⁹ He was acknowledging that the impulses of our physical natures are often too strong for the restraints of our mental and spiritual natures, unless those latter restraints are further strengthened by the Grace which comes from God, and which comes to us primarily through the Sacraments.

A moment’s reflection on our own experiences will bear this out. Who among us has not felt the strong temptation to put off the effort of getting up and going to church on Sunday morning and instead to lie just a bit longer in bed, or to go out and play some interesting game? Who among us has not felt, late at night, just a bit too tired to say the prayers we know we should and has, instead, just rolled over to go to sleep?

Who among us has not seen another who is in need of a word of comfort or sympathy, but has let embarrassment or uncertainty inhibit us from saying it? Who among us has not felt the charitable impulse to donate to the relief of the latest major tragedy or disaster, only to let that impulse be buried by the importunities of our own daily preoccupations?

It is when we are conscious of these shortcomings that we are tempted to cry with St. Paul, “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”¹⁰

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The Rev’d Canon John A. Hollister¹¹
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Introduction:

The traditional Christian view of the human person is that our being has three separate but interrelated aspects. We have physical bodies, which exist in and interact with the created, tangible, physical world. At the same time, a portion of us is not tangible and at least a portion of which will, we believe, survive the death of our physical bodies. This is our soul, which itself is traditionally seen as being composed of our minds and our spirits.

The mind is the directing force that governs our bodies’ actions and the spirit is the life force which animates our bodies. The mind may cease operation when the body to which it is attached dies but the spirit is the part that Christians believe will continue alive until the General Resurrection unites it once again with its unique physical body and its associated mind.

Thus we are truly, in the old phrase, beings of “body, mind, and spirit”.

Theme:

From this perspective, it would be a grave mistake to assume that Christianity makes no distinctions between the physical and spiritual aspects of existence. Clearly, it recognizes the reality and importance of both. On the other hand, it would be a mistake of equal gravity to assume that Christianity in some way exalts the spiritual as “good” and “real” but denigrates the physical, the embodied, as “bad” and, in some way, less real than the spiritual.

This view, of the goodness of the spiritual and the evil of the physical, is an old belief, one that actually predates Christianity. The Church, however, has always considered it an heresy under the name of *Gnosticism* [NOSS-tih-sizm].

That sort of negative dichotomy between the physical and the spiritual runs counter to Scripture's express teaching. You will recall, for example, that we are told several times in Genesis how, after God created the physical universe, He looked on what He had done and "saw that it was good".⁵ Then, when He was finished, "God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good."⁶

Yet, everything recorded in the Scriptural account and that, therefore, God appraised as being "very good" were acts of *physical* creation. So, as St. Paul learned during his vision at Joppa, it is neither safe nor proper for us to declare evil that which God Himself has declared to be good.⁷

Development:

- 1. But if the created physical order is fundamentally good, what are we to make of St. Paul's declaration that "We know that the law is spiritual; but I am carnal, sold under sin"?**

The answer to this first question is that St. Paul was *not* addressing the fundamental nature of the physical universe in which we move and have our present being. It is that nature of the universe that Genesis addresses when it says that God declared His handiwork to be "very good".

That is the *outward* context in which we live our lives. Here, however, Paul is addressing the *inward* conflict that each of us suffers as a direct result of being a person with a physical body, that has physical needs and appetites, while simultaneously having an intangible soul, which includes a spirit that aspires toward God.

- 2. But if God created our souls as well as our bodies, and if He declared the results of His creation to be "very good", why does St. Paul suggest that our spiritual impulses are good while our bodily ones are not?**

The answer to this second question is, once again, to be found in the Book of Genesis. There we are given an explanation for the human tendency to disobey God's wishes and commands, an explanation that is laid out in that most ancient form of human communication, the narrative.

In the story of Adam and Eve's Fall,⁸ we are shown how that third part of our being, our mind, can misuse its faculty of reason to "justify" – I put "justify" in quotation marks, for the result is a specious justification, not a real one – our mind can misuse its God-given faculty of reason to "justify" our doing what God has commanded us not to do.

And this is the essence of Sin: to do that which disobeys God and therefore separates us from God. The proper use of the mind is to direct the body toward fulfilling our proper end, which is union with God; to use that mind to thwart God's wishes for us is simply to abuse its capacity.

By this time, I am sure you have drawn for yourselves the implication that what Adam and Eve did was to allow natural inborn traits, in their case those of curiosity and the search for satisfaction, traits which were given us to facilitate our lives in this physical environment, to overcome the limits God had placed on the exercise of those traits. Because our minds and bodies are intimately and essentially linked, we are particularly prone to this sort of self-delusion and when we give in to it, the results are always unsatisfactory.