

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 First Lesson: ““My son, if thou come to serve the Lord, prepare thy soul for temptation.”⁴ In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Development:

rough measure of how well we are doing in fulfilling Our Lord's command to go out and teach the Gospel to all nations,⁶ but I rather doubt this is the reason our critics seize so readily on our small numbers as evidence of our presumed insignificance.

Of greater concern to us should be the way the world's perception of the importance of numbers gives the devil a hook upon which to hang his arguments. So long as we are actually trying to fulfill the Lord's mission for us, then so long he will try to obstruct us and pull us down. And it is our responsibility to give him as few tools with which to do that as we possibly can.

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March 13, 2011.

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 *Wisdom* 2:1 (KJV).

⁵ *Articles of Religion*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 604 (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

⁶ *St. Matthew* 28:19-20.

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People are usually astonished when we tell them that certain of the Church's doctrines may be verified empirically; at least, they are astonished until, like G. K. Chesterton, we point out that all around us, original sin may easily be observed in operation. As the ninth Article of Religion puts it, "Original sin ... is the fault and corruption of the Nature of every man ... whereby man is very far gone from original righteousness, and is of his own nature inclined to evil..."⁵

And there is another concept that is closely related to that doctrine of original sin – that is, of our inborn tendency to do those things which we ought not to do and to leave undone those things which we ought to do, so that there is no wholeness in us.

This second doctrine, or perhaps better, this other aspect of that first doctrine, is that we are constantly tempted to do the things we should not and to fail to do the things that we should. For it is this constant state of temptation that renders us constantly liable to falling into sin.

That would be bad enough by itself but it is not just by itself. That is, we would always be in danger of falling away from God, by failing to fulfill His wishes for us, even if all that were operating in our environment was that inborn tendency to do evil. Unfortunately, however, that is not the only force that is in play.

We, like all of humanity before us and like all of humanity that will come after us until Our Lord's next Coming, have an enemy. That enemy's goal is to seduce us away from the fellowship with God that is our natural destiny and, as C. S. Lewis's wonderful *Screwtape Letters* show us, that enemy is most successful in misleading us when he is able to conceal from us both his existence and his influence in our lives.

In at least one way, however, the devil is like every other being. He seeks to maximize his successes by employing the principle of economy of effort, especially by the very rational process of applying himself most vigorously to opposing those people and situations that show the most promise of achieving what he does not want them to achieve.

It is something like a football game. If one team knows that its opponents are unusually strong in their offensive capacities, it will concentrate its efforts on defending against just those strengths, in order to prevent that opposing team from succeeding in scoring. So it is with us. As any individual Christian grows in holiness, he or she will find the devil concentrating more and more effort on undoing that increasing holiness. He or she will find that temptations place themselves in the way with greater frequency and the natures of those temptations become ever more enticing. The devil will tend to neglect the low-hanging fruit in the form of those who are obliviously sunk in self-satisfaction in order to tear down those who are making spiritual progress.

Our late, and sainted, Archbishop Michael Dean Stephens used to quote one of his former parishioners, who, when he was enduring extraordinary temptations or even just spiritual “dry spells”, was wont to say, “The devil is camping on my doorstep.”

Much the same is true of organizations and institutions as it is of individuals. Beginning more than thirty years ago, when the Continuing Anglican Churches were formed in opposition to the triumph of modernism and moral revisionism over the old Lambeth Communion, the new movement presented a real threat of renewed attention to spiritual teachings and of revived moral commitment. So it was only to be expected that the devil would have sought to destroy this new movement before it could successfully get itself off the ground.

And the devil found much useful material with which to work. For the original Continuing Churchmen were no less prideful, angry, envious, covetous, gluttonous, lustful, and slothful than were those lax souls in the old churches against whom they were protesting. (And I do hope that, as I spoke those words, you recognized Pride, Anger, Envy, Covetousness, Gluttony, Lust, and Sloth as those Seven Deadly Sins to which the Church has traditionally pointed for its teaching purposes.)

Gluttony, lust, and sloth are more likely to characterize individuals than movements, but all of the Seven Deadly Sins offer the devil opportunities for short-circuiting developments that he finds are contrary to his objectives.

Certainly Pride, Anger, Envy, and Covetousness offered more than sufficient tools to lead certain leaders of the new movement to split it into ever-smaller factions, factions that would offer far less appeal to the wider world than would larger, more cohesive institutions. And for more than thirty years, the first criticism that has been hurled at the Continuing Churches by those who would belittle them has been “You are just an ‘alphabet soup’ of little groups.”

Of course, it betrays a slightly skewed theology to judge the holiness or faithfulness of a church group by the number of its adherents. We must recall that Christianity was founded to be a counter-cultural force, and that as it grew to encompass the entire Roman Empire, it simultaneously lost a significant part of its spiritual authenticity as it incorporated more and more people who sought political or social acceptance rather than spiritual and moral enlightenment.

Conclusion:

So from this perspective, great size is not always an unmixed blessing. Of course size is important as a very