

Sermon for Morning Prayer Quinquagesima Sunday

¹⁷ Genesis 3:1-24.

¹⁸ Calvin and his followers claim that, even before the Creation, God decided that He wished certain specific individuals among those humans who were yet to be created would grasp the oar or the life ring and be saved, and that He wished all other specific individual humans, who were likewise yet to be created, to reject the oar or life ring and be lost. This notion is technically called “double predestination”. In this view, Christ died only to save those who God the Father had already decided would grasp the oar, which is called “limited atonement”. Nor can any person’s faith or actions serve to vary one jot or tittle of his or her predestined fate, which is called “irresistible grace” and “the persistence of the elect”.

Obviously, if these notions were true, there would have been no point in Our Lord’s sending us out to preach to and convert the nations, because the individual fates of each of our hearers would already have been inalterably decided. Nor would Christ have bothered to tell the woman taken in adultery to go and sin no more (St. John 8:11), because whether she would do so or not would have been already determined and therefore beyond her personal control.

¹⁹ St. John 15:8 and 15:16a (KJV).

²⁰ Priest Assistant, 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.

Lessons:¹

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the seventh Verse of the seventh Chapter of the Wisdom of Solomon.²

“... Wherefore I prayed, and understanding was given me: I called upon God, and the spirit of wisdom came to me. I preferred her before sceptres and thrones, and esteemed riches nothing in comparison of her. Neither compared I unto her any precious stone, because all gold in respect of her is as a little sand, and silver shall be counted as clay before her. I loved her above health and beauty, and chose to have her instead of light: for the light that cometh from her never goeth out. All good things together came to me with her, and innumerable riches in her hands. And I rejoiced in them all, because wisdom goeth before them: and I knew not that she was the mother of them. I learned diligently, and do communicate her liberally: I do not hide her riches. For she is a treasure unto men that never faileth: which they that use become the friends of God, being commended for the gifts that come from learning.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

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

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman. Every branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit. Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me. I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye

can do nothing. If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned. If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you. Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples. As the Father hath loved me, so have I loved you: continue ye in my love. If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in his love. These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full. This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you. Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you. Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you friends; for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you. Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain: that whatsoever ye shall ask of the Father in my name, he may give it you. These things I command you, that ye love one another."

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: "Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain..."⁴
In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Introduction:

To the author of the deuterocanonical *The Wisdom of Solomon*, "wisdom" is a divine attribute, an Hebraic concept

false one. Because it did not have the power to amend the lives of those who believe in it, how can it possibly offer the chance to amend the lives of those who do not so believe?

The second conclusion others can come to is that because human beings are essentially selfish, the faith we profess, as shown by the way we live, must indeed be fed by some higher, some super-human power. That power, of course, is what they are seeking because they know, even if only subconsciously, that their own personal powers are unequal to the demands of life.

But all they will initially know of that power is what they see of its working in us, the Christians. That, too, is one form in which prevenient grace makes itself manifest in this naughty world.

--oo0oo--

The Rev'd Canon John A. Hollister²⁰
February 22, 2009.

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

² *Wisdom 7:7-14* (KJV).

³ St. John 15:1-17 (KJV).

⁴ *Ibid.* 15:16a (KJV).

⁵ *Robert C. Dentan, The Wisdom of Solomon*, CHARLES M. LAYMON, ED., THE INTERPRETER'S ONE-VOLUME COMMENTARY ON THE BIBLE 547 (Nashville: Abingdon Press 1971).

⁶ St. John 1:1 (KJV).

⁷ *Wisdom 6:12-14.*

⁸ *Ibid.* 6:13-14 and 6:16.

⁹ *Ibid.* 6:17-20.

¹⁰ St. John 15:1 and 15:3-4 (KJV).

¹¹ *Ibid.* (RSV).

¹² *Ibid.* 15:6 (RSV).

¹³ *Ibid.* 15:10 and 15:14 (KJV).

¹⁴ *Ibid.* (RSV).

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 15:15 (RSV).

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 15:16a (KJV).

of the swimming man to whom a rescue appliance has been extended.

- 4. The authentic Christian life is not merely a personal benefit conferred on us as though we were the lucky winner of a lottery. Christ has called us to Him and has saved us for a wider purpose, a purpose we are required to fulfill for Him.**

“Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples.... Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain....”¹⁹

Christ, out of His immeasurable love of humankind, has saved us for two reasons. One of those reasons is certainly that He loves each one of us and wants each of us to spend eternity in Heaven with Him and with the other Persons of the Trinity. That personal benefit is not the end of the story, however.

He has also saved us in order that we may bring forth fruit for Him, that is, in order that we may bring others to Him so that they, too, may be saved.

Conclusion:

We bring others to Christ in several ways but the most important of those is by living a real, dedicated, and authentic Christian life of our own. If we do this truly and devotedly, other people can sense that in us. Then they can draw two conclusions from what they see and feel in us and in our lives.

The first conclusion they can come to is that we are *sincere* in our belief in Christ and *sincere* in our commitment to Him. The world hates hypocrites and if others sense any hypocrisy in us, they will reject our proffered faith as a

akin to the Hellenic creative principle called the *logos* [LOW-gowse] or Word.⁵ Just recall the wonderful opening lines of St. John’s Gospel: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”⁶

Theme:

This wisdom or *logos* is a form of prevenient [pre-VEE-knee-ent] grace, which God makes accessible to all.⁷ All that a person of good will need do is take advantage of this virtue with which God has surrounded us.⁸ Thereafter, wisdom has a sanctifying power that brings us closer to God.⁹

Development:

- 1. Christ has made it possible for us to ripen into healthy fruit, but that is possible only so long as we are attached to Him, as a grape’s stem attaches it to its vine. Once that grape is plucked, it must be soon eaten, or be crushed into juice, or be cooked into jam, before it begins to rot.**

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the husbandman.... Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me.”¹⁰

The Revised Standard Version renders these verses as: “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser.... You are already made clean by the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me.”¹¹

The message is clear. First, Christ is “the vine”, the means by which God the Father brings forth fruit. Second,

Christ's "word", His Will made active, has cleansed us – and we know that this cleansing has been from the sin and death that would otherwise claim us because of the corruption of our nature. Third, as a result of Christ's cleansing of us, of His incorporation of us into His Body, the vine, we can become good fruit but only so long as we are attached to Him. Once a grape is detached from its vine, it ceases to grow and merely begins to rot.

In other words, there is no authentic Christian life that is not joined to Christ as part of His Body. Thus there is no authentic Christian life that can be lived outside of His Church. "If a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, and thrown into the fire and burned."¹²

2. The authentic Christian life is not an individual life, lived according to our personal ideas of what is right and wrong, but instead must be a life of discipline and obedience, one framed according to Our Lord's commands.

"If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in his love.... Ye are my friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you."¹³

The lesson is even clearer in the Revised Standard Version: "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.... You are my friends if you do what I command you."¹⁴ The importance of being Our Lord's "friends" is explained by His words: "No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you."¹⁵

In other words, when we subject our unruly wills to Christ's own Will, and obey His wishes for us, then we are also obeying the Will of God the Father.

3. We do not come to Jesus Christ by an unaided act of our own puny wills; those wills by themselves are insufficient to overcome our human and natural tendency to sin, that is, to separate ourselves from God. We come to Christ because He has called us to him and has given us sufficient Grace to enable us to respond to His call.

"Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you..."¹⁶
This is the operation of that *prevenient grace* about which we spoke earlier. Christ reaches out to us and offers us the means by which we may come to him; our only part in this process – but it is a vital part – is to exercise our free will to make the choice to accept His invitation or to reject it. But even if we reject it, as all too many do, He still extended that invitation and desired that we should accept it.

Picture to yourself a man who, with a friend, was rowing in a boat in deep water. When he falls out of that boat, he is left swimming for his life. As he tires, he will certainly drown unless he is reunited with his friend in the boat. Ever since the Fall of Adam,¹⁷ our situation has been that of the swimming man.

Then the captain of the boat reaches out to the swimming man, extending him an oar or throwing him a life preserver attached to a rope. Without that oar or that life ring, the swimmer cannot save himself. Once the captain offers him the means of rescue, however, the swimmer has a free choice: he can grasp the offered help, and thereby be saved, or he can reject it, and thereby be drowned.

John Calvin to the contrary notwithstanding,¹⁸ ever since the Ascension of Our Lord, our situation has been that