

**Sermon for Morning Prayer
The Tenth Sunday After Trinity**

Lessons:¹

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

“All wisdom cometh from the Lord, and is with him for ever. Who can number the sand of the sea, and the drops of rain, and the days of eternity? Who can find out the height of heaven, and the breadth of the earth, and the deep, and wisdom? Wisdom hath been created before all things, and the understanding of prudence from everlasting. The word of God most high is the fountain of wisdom; and her ways are everlasting commandments. To whom hath the root of wisdom been revealed? or who hath known her³ wise counsels? [Unto whom hath the knowledge of wisdom been made manifest? and who hath understood her great experience?] There is one wise and greatly to be feared, the Lord sitting upon his throne. He created her, and saw her, and numbered her, and poured her out upon all his works. She is with all flesh according to his gift, and he hath given her to them that love him.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the twenty-fifth Verse of the eighth Chapter of the Gospel According to St. John.⁴

“.. Then said they unto him, Who art thou? And Jesus saith unto them, Even the same that I said unto you from the beginning. I have many things to say and to judge of you: but he that sent me is true; and I speak to the world those things which I have heard of him. They understood not that he spake to them of the Father. Then said Jesus unto them, When ye have lifted up the Son of man, then shall ye know that I am he, and that I do nothing of myself; but as my Father hath taught me, I speak these things. And he that sent

me is with me: the Father hath not left me alone; for I do always those things that please him. As he spake these words, many believed on him. Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed on him, If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.

“They answered him, We be Abraham’s seed, and were never in bondage to any man: how sayest thou, Ye shall be made free? Jesus answered them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin. And the servant abideth not in the house for ever: but the Son abideth ever. If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the First Lesson: “The word of God most high is the fountain of wisdom; and her ways are everlasting commandments.”⁵ In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Introduction:

Wisdom is a subject that preoccupied some sages of ancient Israel to such an extent that there are several books of the Old Testament which form a special category called the “Wisdom Literature”. Because it is found in sacred Scripture, it should come as no surprise that when we speak of Wisdom in this way we are speaking of something peculiarly religious in nature.

That is, we are not discussing common, garden-variety prudence or sagacity but something that is intimately related to a right relationship with God. In fact, in one of its aspects it *is* the creative principle of God at work,⁶ not just

⁶ *Ecclesiasticus* 24:3.

⁷ *Ecclesiasticus* 1:11 (KJV).

⁸ *Ecclesiasticus* 1:14, 16, 18.

⁹ *Ecclesiasticus* 1:26; cf. Edward Lee Beavin, *Ecclesiasticus or the Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach*, in CHARLES M. LAYMON, ED., THE INTERPRETER’S ONE-VOLUME COMMENTARY ON THE BIBLE 551 (Abingdon Press 1971).

¹⁰ *Ecclesiasticus* 1:25a, 26 (KJV).

¹¹ *Ecclesiasticus* 24:23.

¹² Beavin, *supra*.

¹³ *Ecclesiasticus* 1:1, 4-5, 9 (KJV); cf. Beavin, *supra*.

¹⁴ Proverbs 8:22-30 (KJV).

¹⁵ *Sirach* 1:4 (RSV).

¹⁶ *Ecclesiasticus* 1:6-7; cf. Thomas H. Weber, *Sirach*, in 1 RAYMOND E. BROWN, JOSEPH A. FITZMYER, AND ROLAND E. MURPHY, EDs., THE JEROME BIBLICAL COMMENTARY 543 (Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1968).

¹⁷ Beavin, *supra*.

¹⁸ *Ecclesiasticus* 1:2-3, 6 (KJV).

¹⁹ St. John 8:26, 28b, 31b.

²⁰ *Sirach* 1:9-10 (RSV).

²¹ Beavin, *supra*.

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Conclusion:

Of course, we should expect no more than this apportionment to us, considering that Wisdom is part of God's creative force. We are permitted to participate with the Lord of life in certain creative activities, such as in sexual reproduction of our own species, but it would be arrogant in the extreme for us, as creatures, to claim any greater share than that in His broader activity of creation.

This, too, is one of the reasons that even our limited creative rôle, that in sex, must be performed consistently with God's desires and not just with our own. It was given to us so that we can serve in limited partnership with God, and therefore with His creative force, not so that we can aspire to be His equals. In what He permits us to do, we are His agents, not His rivals.

Therefore, for us no less than for the ancient Jews of Ben Sira's day, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom. For us, as for them, this means living in the reverent recognition that God is the Lord of life and, therefore, living in obedience to God's revealed will.

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August 16, 2009.

¹ *Psalms and Lessons for the Church Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxx (PECUSA 1928/1943).

² *Ecclesiasticus* 1:1-10 (KJV).

³ In both Hebrew and Greek, "wisdom" is a feminine noun, respectively *hokmâ* and *sophia*. This grammatical happenstance underlies the rhetorical usage of personifying wisdom as a feminine figure.

⁴ St. John 8:25-36 (KJV).

⁵ *Ecclesiasticus* 1:5 (KJV).

present from before the Creation but an active agent in that Creation, akin to the divine Word or *Logos*.

This Wisdom, insofar as humans can attain it, is defined in both Proverbs and Ecclesiasticus as "the fear of the Lord".⁷ This "fear" does not mean living in anxiety or apprehension about arbitrary impositions of an irrational god, which is how the pagans lived. Instead, it means living in the reverent recognition that God is the Lord of life.⁸ Therefore wisdom also means living in obedience to God's will.⁹

Today's First Lesson is therefore a salutary reminder of important principles that are both extremely unpopular and regular subjects of attack in our current society. We are bombarded with the twin, but utterly false, messages that God is not the ultimate source and guide for all life and that we need only live so as to please ourselves, not Him.

Theme:

For Ben Sira, the author of today's First Lesson, "The parables of knowledge are in the treasures of wisdom. . . . If thou desire wisdom, keep the commandments, and the Lord shall give her unto thee."¹⁰ But what are "the treasures of wisdom" and where are we to find these "commandments"? For Ben Sira, we are to look for Wisdom in the Jewish Law. That Law is the Pentateuch's moral teaching plus all written Scriptures,¹¹ together with the accepted interpretations thereof.¹²

Development:

1. Wisdom is of divine origin and nature.

Today's First Lesson tells us:

"All wisdom cometh from the Lord, and is with him for ever. . . . Wisdom hath been created before all things,

and the understanding of prudence from everlasting. The word of God most high is the fountain of wisdom; and her ways are everlasting commandments.”¹³

Compare these lines with what the Proverbs have to say on the same subject:

“The LORD possessed me in the beginning of his way, before his works of old. I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was. When there were no depths, I was brought forth; when there were no fountains abounding with water. Before the mountains were settled, before the hills was I brought forth: While as yet he had not made the earth, nor the fields, nor the highest part of the dust of the world. When he prepared the heavens, I was there: when he set a compass upon the face of the depth: When he established the clouds above: when he strengthened the fountains of the deep: When he gave to the sea his decree, that the waters should not pass his commandment: when he appointed the foundations of the earth: Then I was by him, as one brought up with him: and I was daily his delight, rejoicing always before him. . . .”¹⁴

“Wisdom was created before all things”¹⁵ and anything that has existed from before the time of material creation is, of necessity, divine in both origin and nature. So Wisdom is an attribute of God, something He makes available to us but that we cannot appropriate for ourselves independently of His gift of it.¹⁶

2. The Lord alone knows Wisdom fully.¹⁷

“Who can number the sand of the sea, and the drops of rain, and the days of eternity? Who can find out the height of heaven, and the breadth of the earth, and the deep, and wisdom? . . . To whom hath the root of wisdom been revealed? or who hath known her wise counsels?”¹⁸

Clearly, the answer to these questions is, “No one”. Thus “the root of Wisdom” remains God’s alone, as is only to be expected of an immemorial and divine attribute and quality.

The implication of this is also clear: Those who would have Wisdom can only obtain it from God and, implicitly, must do so on His terms. We see this truth at work, or, more accurately, being flouted, by those among us who so stridently protest that they still believe in Scripture as normative for human beings but who claim the right to *interpret* that Scripture according to principles of their own devising and without reference to the tradition of interpretation built up by God’s appointed agency of His work and presence, the Church.

Arrogating to oneself the wisdom – in both senses -- and authority to interpret God’s Revelation can only be done by those who ignore the essential message of today’s Second Lesson, which is that Jesus Christ, as the Son of God, is the mouthpiece speaking God’s will to us.¹⁹

3. God gives us Wisdom as His gift and without Him we cannot know her.

“The Lord himself created wisdom; he saw her and apportioned her, he poured her out upon all his works. She dwells with all flesh according to his gift, and he supplied her to those who love him.”²⁰

One commentator has summarized this by saying that, according to Ben Sira, Wisdom is made available to all men in limited measure but she is supplied unstintedly to Israel.²¹ Putting that in terms of the New Israel that has existed since Our Lord’s Ascension, this means that each individual may receive his own small portion of Wisdom but the greatest share is lodged in the Christian community, the Church.