

Sermon for Morning Prayer
Trinity XVIII

Lessons:

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the second Chapter of the Proverbs.¹

“My son, if thou wilt receive my words, and hide my commandments with thee; So that thou incline thine ear unto wisdom, and apply thine heart to understanding; Yea, if thou criest after knowledge, and liftest up thy voice for understanding; If thou seekest her as silver, and searchest for her as for hid treasures; Then shalt thou understand the fear of the LORD, and find the knowledge of God. For the LORD giveth wisdom: out of his mouth cometh knowledge and understanding. He layeth up sound wisdom for the righteous: he is a buckler to them that walk uprightly. He keepeth the paths of judgment, and preserveth the way of his saints. Then shalt thou understand righteousness, and judgment, and equity; yea, every good path.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the fourteenth Verse of the third Chapter of the First Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to Timothy.

“... These things write I unto thee, hoping to come unto thee shortly: But if I tarry too long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth. And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory.

“Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; Speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their consciences seared with a hot iron; Forbid-

ding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth. For every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving: For it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer. If thou put the brethren in remembrance of these things, thou shalt be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished up in the words of faith and of good doctrine, whereunto thou hast attained. But refuse profane and old wives' fables, and exercise thyself rather unto godliness. For bodily exercise profiteth little: but godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come. This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptation. For therefore we both labor and suffer reproach, because we trust in the living God, who is the Saviour of all men, especially those that believe. These things command and teach. Let no man despise thy youth; but be thou an example of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity. Till I come, give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine. Neglect not the gift that is in thee, which was given thee by prophecy, with the laying on of the hands of the presbytery. Meditate upon these things; give thyself wholly to them; that thy profiting may appear to all. Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them; for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee."

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the First Lesson: "[T]he LORD giveth wisdom: out of his mouth cometh knowledge and understanding."²

In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Regardless of one’s personal beliefs about the death penalty, it is manifestly absurd to look at such countries, none of which has a Constitution that is anything like ours, for guidance as to what our Constitution says or means on any issue, although that is precisely what the Supreme Court did in that case. How much more absurd would it be to look to such countries, most of which have now abandoned what little remnants of their Christian heritage they had left after World War II, for guidance on what is right or wrong.

Conclusion:

What we need to do, if we wish to make wise decisions, is simple. It is, at all times and under all circumstances, to frame our personal, family, and collective lives around the recognition that all knowledge comes from God and is only to be found by seeking what it is He wishes to impart to us. Only then can we trust that “[T]he Lord gives wisdom, and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding... he guards the course of the just and protects the way of his faithful ones.”⁶

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September 21, 2008.

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

² Proverbs 2: 6 (KJV).

³ Proverbs 2: 4-5 (KJV).

⁴ John 14: 16-17, 14: 26, 15: 26 & 16: 7-14.

⁵ Acts 15: 28 (KJV).

⁶ Proverbs 2: 6 & 2: 8 (NIV).

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Introduction:

The “wisdom literature” in the Old Testament and in the Apocrypha seems to receive less attention today than it really merits. Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, the Wisdom of Solomon, and Ecclesiasticus all contain wonderful gems of advice for living a godly and upright life. It is a good thing that our Prayer Book Tables of Lessons prescribe a number of lessons from these books for various days of the Church Year, so that at least we Anglicans are periodically exposed to them and their treasures of practical good sense.

There is very little in these books from which we can extract any foundations for the doctrines of the Faith; those are found in the more didactic books of Scripture. The concern of the wisdom books is to instruct us in life and manners, that is, in how to live a pious and worthy life, and, in particular, how such a life must be oriented toward God.

Some people have noticed that the Proverbs consists of exactly thirty-one Chapters and have therefore formed the habit of reading one Chapter each day, frequently as part of their evening devotions, in the same way that many of us read the Psalms “in course” day by day through the month. Those who follow these patterns cover these books every month and so read them twelve times a year.

Theme:

I use that metaphor of “treasure” advisedly. Today’s nugget of wisdom from Proverbs tells us that “If thou seekest [wisdom] as silver, and searchest for her as for hid treasures; Then shalt thou understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God.”³

This passage links two of the enduring themes of the whole “wisdom literature”: first, that true wisdom consists of knowing God and, second, that we can only attain to

knowledge of God through a healthy and informed fear of Him. That knowledge, however, is not something we attain on our own; like everything else that is good in life, it is, itself, a gift from God to us.

Development:

1. Our society today has largely forgotten that God is the source of all wisdom.

Today, when we are confronted with any problem or any question, we seek an appropriate answer in the one or more of the myriad methodologies that the current educational system inculcates in us. For example, if it is a question of what society should do about a certain issue, we often take polls, to determine what the opinion of a majority of the population is regarding that matter. Or we may resort to anthropological or sociological studies and investigations for the same purpose. Or we may convene a panel of well-known people, in any form from a formal blue-ribbon government commission to a few celebrities on a morning talk show, and ask their collective advice.

Notice, however, that these techniques, which our “educators” find so congenial, are all oriented toward human beings. They use mankind as the measure and can tell us only what many people, or at least some people, think is the correct position on the issue in question.

Our forefathers, however, tended to have a different view on such questions. They recognized that human beings are *not* the source of essential knowledge, God is. When important answers were needed, they did not try to discover what other people thought about the problems at hand, they tried to find out what God thought about them. Human beings, after all, can know only so much as God has allowed them to learn. Even the things we reason out for ourselves

are known to us only because God gave us that faculty of reason to use in that way.

2. How different things would be in our lives, both our personal lives and our social lives, if we approached important questions by asking ourselves, “What is God calling us to do in this situation?”

From its very beginning, the Church has approached its most important questions as a matter of discerning God’s will. Thus when an early dispute threatened to split the Church, the Apostles met expressly to invoke Our Lord’s promise that the Holy Spirit would guide the Church until the end of time.⁴ That they met to discern the Spirit’s will is revealed by the words they used to announce the results of their deliberations: “[I]t seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us....”⁵

The Church follows this same pattern at all its levels, whether at a parish Vestry meeting, a diocesan Synod, or a national Synod: it meets only after prayer that invokes the guidance of the Holy Spirit for the deliberations of the body that is meeting. Even our elections of bishops are not, properly speaking, the exercise of personal choice by the delegated electors; instead, those electors serve, when they serve correctly, as agents for discerning who the Spirit has called to be the Pastor of the vacant Diocese.

We should all adopt this same attitude in our personal lives and, oh, how much better off we would be if something of the same attitude prevailed in the decision-making of our secular bodies and agencies. I was particularly struck by this not long ago when I read that our Supreme Court, in considering a question involving the application of the death penalty, had announced that its decision was based, in part, on the positions currently taken by various European countries.