

SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYER¹
ST. MARK (APRIL 25)

The Rev. Warren E. Shaw, Priest Associate

Lessons:²

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the second Chapter of the Wisdom of Jesus the son of Sirach, or Ecclesiasticus.³

“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, long-suffering, and very pitiful, and forgiveth sins, and saveth in time of affliction.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the fourth Chapter of the Second Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to Timothy.⁴

“I charge thee therefore before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom; Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all long suffering and doctrine. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having

itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables. But watch thou in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry. For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing. Do thy diligence to come shortly unto me: For Demas [DEE-muss] hath forsaken me, having loved this present world, and is departed unto Thessalonica; Crescens [KRESS-unz] to Galatia, Titus [TIE-tuss] unto Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me. Take Mark, and bring him with thee: for he is profitable to me for the ministry. ... At my first answer no man stood with me, but all men forsook me: I pray God that it may not be laid to their charge. Notwithstanding the Lord stood with me, and strengthened me; that by me the preaching might be fully known, and that all the Gentiles might hear: and I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion. And the Lord shall deliver me from every evil work, and will preserve me unto his heavenly kingdom: to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith...”⁵ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Homily:

In today’s Second Lesson, St. Paul is contemplating his own death, which he believes is imminent. He does not see it as a tragedy, even though he is relatively young. He sees it simply as the end of his work on earth. He calls it the time of his departure.

“I have fought a good fight,” he says. And that fight, as our baptismal rite tells us, is against “sin, the world, and the devil”. “I have finished the course,” he continues, “I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness which the Lord will give me on that day, and not to me only but to all who love his appearing.”

There is a reference here to the Greek athletic contests, the ancient Olympics, where the champions were given crowns woven from olive branches or laurel. But there is also a reference to a scene depicted in the Apocrypha. Let me read it to you from the Second Book of Esdras:

“I, Ezra, saw on Mount Zion a great multitude which I could not number, and they were all praising the Lord with songs. In their midst was a young man of great stature, taller than any of the others, and on the head of each of them he placed a crown. But he was more exalted than they. And I was held spellbound. Then I asked an angel, ‘Who are these, my Lord?’ He answered and said to me, ‘These are they who have put off mortal clothing and have put on the immortal, and they have confessed the name of God. Now they are being crowned and receive palms.’ Then I said to the angel, ‘Who is that young man who places crowns on them and puts palms in their hands?’ He answered and said unto me, ‘He is the Son of God, whom they confessed in the world.’”

There is some disagreement about when this book was written and whether St. Paul had access to it, but there is little doubt that the scene described was written at a time when Christians were under persecution.

The word “martyr” means “witness”. It has come to be applied to those who, given a choice between apostasy and death, choose the latter. But even if you do not have to pay with your life for your testimony of Christ, you can still be a witness to his impact on your life. And so St. Paul includes among those who

will be given crowns all of us who love both the first and the second coming of Christ.

In much of Africa and Asia today our fellow Christians are being murdered because they refuse to give up their faith. But I am not preaching to them. I am preaching to people who enjoy the freedom to practice our religion openly without fear of being executed for it. How ashamed should we be that our witness is so feeble compared to theirs?

Death marks the end of our work on earth. It is God who decides when that will be. St. Paul, when he wrote this epistle, was in prison under sentence of death. He knew, or thought he knew, that the time of his departure was near. But since he was not sure about the timing of his demise, and none of us can ever be sure, the great Apostle prepared himself to go on living and working as well as to die.

He asks young Timothy to come to him in prison and to bring some things he will need to continue his work — a cloak to keep him warm as winter approaches, some books, and some parchments, which are important documents because they are written on animal skins rather than on papyrus. Clearly the man intends to continue to serve the Lord and the Church right up to the time he is called receive his crown. That is the attitude with which you and I must also look upon our time in this world.

The psalmist says that a human life span is seventy, or perhaps eighty years. But that is not guaranteed. There are people present who have exceeded that age, and there are many who have died before reaching it. Jesus Himself could have gone on teaching and preaching and healing for many years had He not died so young. But it is God who decides when our work is done and when it is not.

The crown of righteousness awaits those of us who bear witness in this world to Jesus. But as Yogi Berra is alleged to have said, “It ain’t over til it’s over.”

Whether we are young or old we need to be prepared to depart this world at any time, because the call could come at any time. But we also need to be prepared to continue with the work that God has given us to do.

The Apostle has set the example. He looks forward both to death and to life. He is prepared for either.

“I have finished the course,” he says. “I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness which the Lord will give me on that day, and not to me only but to all who love his appearing.” But just in case, bring me my cloak and my books, and especially the parchments.

--oo0oo--

St. David’s Anglican Catholic Church
Charlottesville, Virginia

October 18, 2009

¹ “Any set of Psalms and Lessons appointed for the evening of any day may be read at the morning service, and any set of morning Psalms and Lessons may be read in the evening.” *Concerning the Service of the Church*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER viii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

² *Psalms and Lessons for the Fixed Holy Days* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xlv (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

³ *Ecclesiasticus* 2:1-11 (KJV).

⁴ II Timothy 4:1-11, 16-18 (KJV).

⁵ II Timothy 4:7 (KJV).