

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER
The Twelfth Sunday after Trinity

The Rev. Warren E. Shaw, Priest-in-Charge

Lessons and Psalm:¹

Psalm: The portion of the Psalter appointed for the Twelfth Sunday after Trinity is Psalm Number One Hundred Thirty-Nine:²

O LORD, thou hast searched me out, and known me. * Thou knowest my down-sitting, and mine uprising; thou understandest my thoughts long before.

Thou art about my path, and about my bed; * and art acquainted with all my ways.

For lo, there is not a word in my tongue, * but thou, O LORD, knowest it altogether.

Thou hast beset me behind and before, * and laid thine hand upon me.

Such knowledge is too wonderful and excellent for me; * I cannot attain unto it.

Whither shall I go then from thy Spirit? * or whither shall I go then from thy presence?

If I climb up into heaven, thou art there; * if I go down to hell, thou art there also.

If I take the wings of the morning, * and remain in the uttermost parts of the sea;

Even there also shall thy hand lead me, * and thy right hand shall hold me.

If I say, Peradventure the darkness shall cover me; * then shall my night be turned to day.

Yea, the darkness is no darkness with thee, but the night is as clear as the day; * the darkness and light to thee are both alike.

For my reins³ are thine; * thou hast covered me in my mother's womb.

I will give thanks unto thee, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made: * marvellous are thy works, and that my soul knoweth right well.

My bones are not hid from thee, * though I be made secretly, and fashioned beneath in the earth.

Thine eyes did see my substance, yet being imperfect; * and in thy book were all my members written;

Which day by day were fashioned, * when as yet there was none of them.

How dear are thy counsels unto me, O God; * O how great is the sum of them!

If I tell them, they are more in number than the sand: * when I wake up, I am present with thee.

Wilt thou not slay the wicked, O God? * Depart from me, ye blood-thirsty men.

For they speak unrighteously against thee; * and thine enemies take thy Name in vain.

Do not I hate them, O LORD, that hate thee? * and am not I grieved with those that rise up against thee?

Yea, I hate them right sore; * even as though they were mine enemies.

Try me, O God, and seek the ground of my heart; * prove me, and examine my thoughts.

Look well if there be any way of wickedness in me; * and lead me in the way everlasting.

GLORY be to the Father, and to the Son, * and to the Holy Ghost;

As it was in the beginning, now is, and ever shall be, * world without end. Amen.

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the eleventh Verse of the fifteenth Chapter of the Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach, or Ecclesiasticus.⁴

“... Say not thou, It is through the Lord that I fell away: for thou oughtest not to do the things that he hateth. Say not thou, He hath caused me to err [IRR]: for he hath no need of the sinful

Jesus said, “I will pray the Father and he will give you another comforter that he may abide with you forever; even the Spirit of Truth, whom the world cannot receive because it seeth him not neither knoweth him, but you know him, for he dwelleth with you and shall be in you.”

St. Paul said, “As you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you, both to will and to do of his good pleasure.”

Let us pray:

“O God, by who the meek are guided in judgment, and light riseth up in darkness for the godly; Grant us in all our doubts and uncertainties the grace to ask what thou wouldest have us to do, that the Spirit of Wisdom may save us from all false choices, and that in thy light we may see light, and in thy straight path may not stumble; through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

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St. David's Anglican Catholic Church
Charlottesville, Virginia

September 11, 2011

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

² Psalm 139 (MCV).

³ *I.e.*, the kidneys, which were for the ancient Hebrews the seat of the emotions, just as the heart was for the Medieval French.

⁴ *Ecclesiasticus* 15:11-end (KJV).

⁵ *Philippians* 2:12-18 (KJV).

⁶ *Philippians* 2:12 (KJV).

⁷ *Psalm* 139:7-12 (RSV).

You and I, like the Christians in ancient Philippi, must workout the implications of our faith in a plethora of circumstances. We that with fear and trembling, but we do not have to do it alone.

As your pastor I can offer you some guidance in dealing with the decisions and the temptations in your life. But I cannot be with you all the time, and even if I could I'm not as wise as St. Paul or as confident in my own discernment. But I'm not alone either. God is at work in me as well as in you to enable us both to will and do His good pleasure.

As a Christian, you are never really alone. When you go on vacation, God goes with you. When you go to your place of business or to a job interview, God goes with you. When you go into the hospital, or even into the valley of the shadow of death, God does with you.

Listen to the words of the Psalm for today:

“Whither shall I go from thy Spirit?

Or wither shall I flee from thy presence?

If I ascend up into heaven thou art there.

If I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there.

If I take the wings of the morning

and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,

even there shall thy hand lead me,

and thy right hand shall hold me.

If I say, ‘Let only darkness cover me,

and the light about me be night,’

even the darkness is not dark to thee,

the night is as bright as the day;

for darkness is as light with thee.”⁷

Remember this, then. When you leave this place you do not leave the presence of God.

man. The Lord hateth all abomination; and they that fear God love it not. He himself made man from the beginning, and left him in the hand of his counsel; If thou wilt, to keep the commandments, and to perform acceptable faithfulness. He hath set fire and water before thee: stretch forth thy hand unto whether thou wilt. Before man is life and death; and whether him liketh shall be given him. For the wisdom of the Lord is great, and he is mighty in power, and beholdeth all things: And his eyes are upon them that fear him, and he knoweth every work of man. He hath commanded no man to do wickedly, neither hath he given any man licence to sin.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the twelfth Verse of the second Chapter of the Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Philippians.⁵

“... Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure. Do all things without murmurings and disputings: That ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world; Holding forth the word of life; that I may rejoice in the day of Christ, that I have not run in vain, neither laboured in vain. Yea, and if I be offered upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I joy, and rejoice with you all. For the same cause also do ye joy, and rejoice with me.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “Wherefore my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and

trembling.”⁶ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Homily:

If you look at that text in isolation, and if you are not familiar with St. Paul, you could get the impression that the Apostle is advocating a kind of religious self-help program, as if salvation could be achieved on your own initiative and with your own efforts. But if you are familiar with St. Paul’s theology and his consistent theme of salvation as a gracious gift of God, you would know that the Apostle would have cut out his tongue if he thought that anything he said could be construed in such a way.

Salvation means release from the bondage of sin and death. Our own experience, like the Pauline epistles, teaches us that we can postpone death for a time but cannot ultimately escape from its clutches. Likewise we can resist temptation and refrain from committing specific sinful acts, at least most of the time, but we cannot consistently measure up to the standard of moral perfection demanded by the justice and righteous judgment of God.

So if the Apostle is not trying to tell us that we need to pull up our socks and lace up our shoes and find a way to escape from the bondage of sin and death, what is he trying to tell us?

As usual, we can get insight from the context of the letter in which this text appears.

St. Paul was a traveling evangelist. He moved from place to place establishing churches as he went. But he did not simply abandon the congregations he established. He kept in touch by letter and by personal messengers, and he visited in person whenever he could to provide the people with counsel and direction. He helped his converts to order their lives as Christians in a hostile world. He helped them to conduct their family life and their business life and their ecclesiastical affairs in accordance with the demands of their new found faith.

St. Paul’s relationship with the Corinthian Church was especially troublesome, but his relationship with the Philippian Church was a very happy one. The people did everything he asked of them. They were loyal to him and supportive of him. They were generous in their giving, anxious to learn, and gracious in their hospitality.

But the Apostle wrote this letter from prison. He was unable to be with his people in person, and it was questionable if he would ever see them again. The outcome of his trial was in doubt, and it did not look good. He was well aware of the possibility of martyrdom. So he writes to tell the people in this church that they are going to have to learn to get along without him, and work out the implications of the Gospel on their own. That is what he means by working out their own salvation.

Their Salvation has already been given. That’s not something they have to try to achieve. But the implications for their day to day lives have to be worked out as they go along. And that has to be done with fear and trembling, because it is serious business. The Apostle hastens to add, however, and this is really the point that I want to stress, that God will be at work in them to enable them to do the right thing. “For it is God which worketh in you,” he says, “both to will and to do of his good pleasure.”

I’m reminded of what I told my parish in the Episcopal Church when I retired. “I’m leaving,” I said, “but The Holy Spirit is staying.”

It is easy when we are here, in the company of other Christians, surrounded by symbols of the faith, in a building dedicated to the worship of God. Here, it is easy to be do what is pleasing to God. But out there in a world that cares little about you and even less about God, it is not always easy to know what is right and not always easy to do it even when you know it.