

Sermon for Evening Prayerⁱ
The Sunday Next Before Advent
(Trinity XXV, 2010)

Lessons:ⁱⁱ

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the ninth Verse of the eleventh Chapter of Ecclesiastes, or, The Preacher.ⁱⁱⁱ

“Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth; and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes: but know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment. Therefore remove sorrow from thy heart, and put away evil from thy flesh: for childhood and youth are vanity.

“Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them; While the sun, or the light, or the moon, or the stars, be not darkened, nor the clouds return after the rain: In the day when the keepers of the house shall tremble, and the strong men shall bow themselves, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those that look out of the windows be darkened, And the doors shall be shut in the streets, when the sound of the grinding is low, and he shall rise up at the voice of the bird, and all the daughters of music shall be brought low; Also when they shall be afraid of that which is high, and fears shall be in the way, and the almond tree shall flourish, and the grasshopper shall be a burden, and desire shall fail: because man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets: Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern. Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.

“Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher; all is vanity....

“Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil. ”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the thirteenth Chapter of the Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews.^{iv}

“Let brotherly love continue. Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them; and them which suffer adversity, as being yourselves also in the body. Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled: but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge. Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee. So that we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me. Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation. Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever. Be not carried about with divers and strange doctrines. For it is a good thing that the heart be established with grace; not with meats, which have not profited them that have been occupied therein. We have an altar, whereof they have no right to eat which serve the tabernacle. For the bodies of those beasts, whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest for sin, are burned without the camp. Wherefore Jesus also, that he might sanctify the people with his own blood, suffered without the gate. Let us go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach. For here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come. By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name. But to do good and to communicate forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased. Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you. Pray for us: for we trust we have a good conscience, in all things willing to live honestly. But I beseech you the rather to do this, that I may be restored to you the sooner. Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, Make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is wellpleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled: but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge.”^v In the Name of the Father, and of the ☩ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Homily:

After our drives for food and physical protection, the sexual impulse is probably the most powerful instinct to which we, as human beings, are subject. Sometimes, indeed, as in the case of adolescents who are experiencing the first powerful surges of the sex hormones, the sexual impulse seems to take priority even over nutrition and safety.

Where our capacities and needs to reproduce our species are so overwhelming, it is inevitable that this aspect of the life force has powerful repercussions on our relationship with the One who created that life force, that is, with God. It is part of God’s plan for us that we should live and thrive and a major component of that thriving is that we, as individuals, should replace ourselves so that our portion of the animal creation can continue on.

It should be a profoundly humbling thought that God has granted us His grace so as to permit us to be partners with him in bringing a life into being. Doubtless we are junior partners in that endeavor, for the life principle unquestionably comes from Him and we merely coöperate with Him in directing it, but although junior partners with him, we are real partners nonetheless. It is indeed a divine gift to be able to take part in the creation of new life.

Of course, the greatest gifts are seldom unrestricted. Instead, they usually come with some limitations, inherent or imposed, on their use and enjoyment. Indeed, the whole Old Testament account of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden^{vi} can be understood in one way as God’s gift to them of immortal life and their unwillingness to abide by the terms and limitations upon which that gift was made.

So it is scarcely suprising that, from the earliest time that the ancient Jews became aware of this divine nature of the gift of bestowing

life, they also understood that it was subject to certain important limitations and restrictions, of which the most important was that it was to be used fundamentally for that specific purpose, that is, for creating new life.

Further, they understood that abiding by those restrictions, and using that great gift only in the way that God had intended for them to use it, was a significant part of their acknowledgement to God both of their gratitude for that gift and of His sovereign right to command their obedience in the manner of their using that gift. In short, they recognized that the right use of their reproductive instincts and capacities was a serious matter of religious observance and duty.

As you can imagine, this has never been a popular idea because its implications for the conduct of human life are so profound. We are not free to do just that which pleases us; instead, we are bound to do that which pleases God, which is very seldom precisely the same thing. Nor are we free to define for ourselves what it is that will be pleasing to God, that is, what is right, and what will be displeasing to God, that is, what is wrong. Instead, we have to accept as given what God has told us will please Him or will displease Him.

Yet human beings have always exerted a great deal of energy trying to convince themselves that what when God has told them what pleases or displeases Him, either they can convince Him to change His mind or, equally satisfactorily, they can safely disregard what He has told them about these matters.

Now it is perfectly possible to understand how an atheist feels safe and justified in dismissing God's commands, for that atheist, by definition, does not accept the existence of God and therefore feels no obligation to obey one who, in his or her eyes, is not real. What is nearly impossible to understand rationally is how one and the same person can simultaneously both acknowledge the existence and sovereignty of God but yet still chop and change, trying to argue away the stringencies and inconveniences of God's moral commands.

For example, one of today's favorite techniques for downplaying the seriousness of God's commands regarding the generative faculties is

to argue that God is too remote, or at least too busy, to concern Himself with small matters such as who is bedding whom and what they may be doing there under the covers. While that argument may be superficially appealing, it cannot remain very comforting once one has reflected that God is unlike to give us a share in His divine attributes without also taking some care to watch over how we use that share.

Yet, as we all know, many do tie themselves up in such mental knots and the more they perceive the self-defeating nature of their thinking, the more fervently and zealously they pursue it, like an animal whose struggles against a snare serve only to tie it ever tighter in the coils of the trap.

Conclusion:

It is from this perspective that the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews warned his readers “Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled: but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge.”^{vii} He thus reminds us of two salutary truths. First, eventually we, each of us, will indeed be judged and so called to give an account for our personal actions here on earth.

Second, among those matters for which we will have to account, a principal one is how we have made use of that, quite literally, God-given gift of creating new life. If we have used it as God has instructed us to, that is, within the Sacrament of Marriage, then all will be well on that front. If, however, we fell into the trap of thinking we could define the terms of its use to suit ourselves, then all will not be nearly so well with us.

““He who has ears to hear, let him hear.””^{viii}

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The Rev'd Canon John A. Hollister^{ix}
November 21, 2010.

ⁱ “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).

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

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ecclesiastes* 11: 9—12: 8, 13-14 (KJV).

^{iv} *Hebrews* 13: 1-21 (KJV).

^v *Hebrews* 13: 4 (KJV).

^{vi} *Genesis* 1: 26—3: 24.

^{vii} *Hebrews* 13: 4 (KJV).

^{viii} *St. Mark* 4: 9 (RSV).

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