

SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYER SEPTUAGESIMA SUNDAYⁱ

Lessons:ⁱⁱ

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the forty-ninth Verse of the second Chapter of the First Book of the Maccabees.ⁱⁱⁱ

“... Now when the time drew near that Mattathias [**matt-uh-THIGH-uss**] should die, he said unto his sons, Now hath pride and rebuke gotten strength, and the time of destruction, and the wrath of indignation: Now therefore, my sons, be ye zealous for the law, and give your lives for the covenant of your fathers. Call to remembrance what acts our fathers did in their time; so shall ye receive great honour and an everlasting name. Was not Abraham found faithful in temptation, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness? Joseph in the time of his distress kept the commandment and was made lord of Egypt. Phinees^{iv} [**FINN-ee-eze**] our father in being zealous and fervent obtained the covenant of an everlasting priesthood. Jesus^v for fulfilling the word was made a judge in Israel. Caleb for bearing witness before the congregation received the heritage of the land. David for being merciful possessed the throne of an everlasting kingdom. Elias^{vi} for being zealous and fervent for the law was taken up into heaven. Ananias^{vii} [**ann-uh-NYE-uss**], Azarias^{viii} [**azz-uh-RYE-uss**], and Misael^{ix} [**MISS-ay-ull**], by believing were saved out of the flame. Daniel for his innocency was delivered from the mouth of lions. And thus consider ye throughout all ages, that none that put their trust in him shall be overcome. Fear not then the words of a sinful man: for his glory shall be dung and worms. To day he shall be lifted up and to morrow he shall not be found, because he is returned into his dust, and his thought is come to nothing. Wherefore, ye my sons, be valiant and shew yourselves men in the behalf of the law; for by it shall ye obtain glory.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the eleventh Verse of the sixth Chapter of the First Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to Timothy.^x

“... But thou, O man of God, flee these things; and follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness. Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, whereunto thou art also called, and hast professed a good profession before many witnesses. I give thee charge in the sight of God, who quickeneth all things, and before Christ Jesus, who before Pontius Pilate witnessed a good confession; That thou keep this commandment without spot, unrebukeable, until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ: Which in his times he shall shew [SHOW], who is the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords; Who only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen, nor can see: to whom be honour and power everlasting. Amen. Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not highminded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy; That they do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate; Laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.”^{xi} In the Name of the Father, and of the ☩ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Homily:

As St. Paul writes to Timothy, the object of the Christian life here on earth is to attain that eternal life which we have been promised. This attaining eternal life is what he meant when he told Timothy to “take hold of the eternal life to which you were called....” But to live out that Christian vocation, and therefore to gain that eternal life, two separate but related things are required.

Like many pairs of important principles or forces, these two things seem always to be in tension, each pulling against the other. The one

thing is what we actually *do* about our beliefs – or, frequently, what we *do not* do about them – all of which is sometimes referred to as our “works”. The other thing is what we *say* about our beliefs which, if those beliefs are actually sincere, is sometimes referred to as our “faith”.

“Works” and “faith” have sometimes been seen in opposition. For this reason, they have been the subjects of much heated but completely unnecessary controversy in the course of Christian history. Thus Luther stressed that *only* “faith” could save us, and that for our salvation, mere “works” are irrelevant, while the Medieval Roman Catholic Church, against which he was protesting, seemed at the “street” level to be teaching that “works” alone, without any understanding “faith”, could bring salvation.

But the apparent opposition of “works” and “faith” is actually illusory, which is why I term the controversy over them “completely unnecessary”. The true relationship of each of these to the other is carefully spelled out for us in the eleventh, twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth *Articles of Religion*, which you will find printed at the very end of the Book of Common Prayer.^{xii}

The first of these Christian principles, the “works” part, is that we must live a Christian life. This is what St. Paul meant when he told Timothy to “Fight the good fight of the faith”, for struggling to live a Christian life often seems like fighting a battle, only in doing so the enemy we fight is most often ourselves. As Walt Kelly’s^{xiii} immortal comic strip character, the opossum Pogo,^{xiv} said in 1970 on the occasion of the first Earth Day, “We have met the enemy and he is us.”

Living the Christian life seems simple enough, until we actually try to do it. Then we encounter the reason that C. S. Lewis remarked that the problem with Christianity is not that it has been tried and found wanting, but that it has been found hard and therefore not tried.

But despite that difficulty, we must at all times act according to the Law of God and the rules of the Church, doing that which is proper, upright, and moral. After all, it would be impossible for us to be *sanctified* people, that is, people made holy to God, when we live in ways that are directly contrary to God’s commands to us.

Further, part of the Christian life is commending Christ to others who do not yet know Him, yet we can scarcely do that if those others observe that we live and act in ways that show that same Christ has had no impact whatever on *our* lives.

The second of these Christian principles, the “faith” part, is what St. Paul meant when he reminded Timothy that “you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses....” This public profession of our adherence to the principles of the Faith, which is made by us or for us at Baptism,^{xv} is itself important for two reasons.

For one thing, our professing the Faith publicly is an important part of our witness to the world that Jesus is our Lord and Savior. For the world fully to accept and understand that truth, we must affirm it *both* on our lips and in our lives.

For another thing, that public confession of faith is our personal commitment to know, and to love, and to follow our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. When the going gets difficult, it is always easier to keep to a promise that we have made publicly, before witnesses than it is to keep to one that we have made silently in our hearts. This is, for example, one of the reasons that wedding vows are not considered to be valid until they are exchanged before an adequate number of witnesses. Once that is done, the full support of the community is enlisted in the cause of helping the partners to the promise to abide by their commitment.

Thus our Protestant brothers and Sisters are following a proper instinct when they emphasize their “altar calls” and that a new Christian must express a personal commitment to take Jesus as Lord and Savior. Where they miss the mark is in the way they permit that personal commitment to be solitary, disconnected from the institutional Church, as though one can properly be a Christian when out of fellowship with other Christians.

Related to that misimpression is the way they downgrade Baptism into a mere rite of passage rather than a true Sacrament instituted by Our Lord Himself. Thus they fail to link these signs of personal commitment to the public physical act by which one enters the Christian community

in which that commitment is to be lived out, which is how our Lord intended these things to be.

Conclusion:

So, in recognizing the needs for, and in balancing the seemingly competing claims of, “works” and “faith”, we can find sound guidance in St. Paul’s words to Timothy: “Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.”^{xvi}

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The Rev’d Canon John A. Hollister^{xvii}
February 20, 2011.

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* xvii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

ⁱⁱⁱ *I Maccabees* 2:49-64 (KJV).

^{iv} *I.e., Phinehas.*

^v *I.e., Joshua.*

^{vi} *I.e., Elijah.*

^{vii} *I.e., Hananiah.*

^{viii} *I.e., Azariah.*

^{ix} *I.e., Mishael.*

^x *I Timothy* 6:11-19 (KJV).

^{xi} *I Timothy* 6:12 (RSV).

^{xii} *THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER* 605 (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

^{xiii} 1913-1973.

^{xiv} *Syndicated* 1948-1975.

^{xv} *Ibid., The Ministration of Holy Baptism* 276-278.

^{xvi} *I Timothy* 6:12 (RSV).

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