

Sermon for Morning Prayer Trinity XIII

Lessons:ⁱ

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the seventeenth Chapter of the Wisdom of Jesus the son of Sirach, or Ecclesiasticus:ⁱⁱ

“The Lord created man of the earth, and turned him into it again. He gave them few days, and a short time, and power also over the things therein. He endued them with strength by themselves, and made them according to his image, and put the fear of man upon all flesh, and gave him dominion over beasts and fowls. They received the use of the five operations of the Lord,ⁱⁱⁱ and in the sixth place he imparted them understanding, and in the seventh speech, an interpreter of the cogitations thereof. Counsel, and a tongue, and eyes, and ears, and a heart, gave he them to understand. Withal he filled them with the knowledge of understanding, and showed them good and evil. He set his eye upon their hearts, that he might show them the greatness of his works. He gave them to glory in his marvelous acts forever, that they might declare his works with understanding. And the elect shall praise his holy name. Beside this he gave them knowledge, and the law of life for an heritage. He made an everlasting covenant with them, and showed them his judgments. Their eyes saw the majesty of his glory, and their ears heard his glorious voice. And he said unto them, Beware of all unrighteousness; and he gave every man commandment concerning his neighbor. Their ways are ever before him, and shall not be hid from his eyes.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the twentieth Verse of the third Chapter of the Gospel according to St. Mark:^{iv}

“And the multitude cometh together again, so that they could not so much as eat bread. And when his friends heard of it, they went out to lay hold on him: for they said, He is beside himself. ... There came then his brethren and his mother, and, standing without, sent unto him, calling him. And the multitude sat about him, and they said unto him, Behold thy mother and thy brethren without seek for thee. And he

answered them, saying, Who is my mother, or my brethren? And he looked round about on them which sat about him, and said, Behold my mother and my brethren! For whosoever shall do the will of God, the same is my brother, and my sister, and mother.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “... [H]e looked round about on them which sat about him, and said, Behold my mother and my brethren! For whosoever shall do the will of God, the same is my brother, and my sister, and mother.”^v

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

Introduction:

Over the course of two millennia, this passage, and the similar account in the eighth chapter of St. Luke’s Gospel, have given rise to much speculation about just who these “brethren of Our Lord” were: were they Joseph and Mary’s children, born to them after Christ’s birth? Were they Joseph’s children by a prior, deceased wife? Were they Jesus’ cousins, kinfolk close enough to be called “brothers and sisters” in a generic way but actually more distant than siblings?

This morning, however, we will leave those intriguing speculations aside in order to concentrate on the point on which Christ was here instructing the company with which He was eating.

Theme:

Christ was always alert to take advantage of incidents and interactions that took place in the course of daily life and to use these “teachable moments” to convey to his hearers some important lesson. Here, in today’s Gospel lesson, He took advantage of the message that was delivered to Him and turned it into a mini-sermon about the nature of the Church, the New Israel, and in particular about the ways that

Church differs from the Chosen People of the Mosaic Covenant, the Old Israel that preceded the Church and out of which the Church grew.

While both the Old Covenant People and the New Covenant People came into being in response to God's special call, they differed in one vital respect. In the Old Covenant, God called a particular race, or group of tribes, united to one another by blood, being all, at least in theory, the descendants of one human ancestor, Abraham. This meant that there was no choice about being a member of that People: those who were born into designated tribes were born into the Covenant People and were given no choice in the matter. Similarly, those who were not born into the favored tribes were not part of the Covenant People and, with very limited exceptions, could not join it even if they wished to.

Development:

1. The Church is the Church of the whole world.

The Old Testament Church, the "Chosen People" of the Mosaic Covenant, formed just one tribe or nation among many other tribes and nations. The Israelite people was not even the greatest, the most powerful, or the most numerous among the tribes and nations that surrounded it; for much of its history, it was, by comparison with those others, small, weak, and few.

The People of Israel were just one people out of many, just as the God of Israel was originally thought to be just one God out of many. For if there were no other gods, there would have been no need for that one God to command His people, "I am the Lord thy God ... Thou shalt have no other gods before me".^{vi}

In contrast, the New Testament Church, the people of the New Covenant, is intended not for just one family or clan or tribe or nation, but for all peoples, for all nations, for the whole world.

2. Membership in the Church is not by birth but by *re*-birth.

The Old Covenant people was a true tribe. All of its members belonged to natural families, each of which belonged to a clan, and each of those clans belonged to one of twelve tribes, each of which claimed descent from one of Jacob's twelve sons. Obviously, too, all of those tribes together claimed actual descent through their original tribal chief-siblings from their father Jacob, and through Jacob from his father Isaac, and through Isaac from his father, Abraham, to whom God offered the original national covenant.

Thus the whole people of Israel was bound together by its belief that every single Israelite was descended from the same blood line, was a real kinsman or kinswoman of every other Israelite. Each became a member of the covenant people by circumcision, in the case of a male, or by presentation, in the case of a female, but in each case only those born into the Israelite nation could undergo those rites of membership.^{vii}

Further, those rites were almost always administered to a newborn baby by that baby's close relatives. Thus this membership was by birth, not by choice,^{viii} and, with only the fewest exceptions, no outsider not born to the national family could ever become a member. In the few cases where an outsider did convert to Judaism, it was by a form of adoption, the outsider thus ceasing to be an outsider, losing his original identity, and becoming for all purposes a member of the family, assuming a new identity.

So under the Old Covenant, out of all persons born upon earth, generally the only ones who could be Israelites were those who happened to have been born to Israelite families.

In contrast, membership in the Church does not come through natural birth; there are no "born Christians". A person becomes a Christian by believing in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, followed by publicly expressing that faith, followed by baptism into Him. At that point, the new Christian is "re-born" spiritually and sacramentally and, by virtue of that fact, becomes a member of the Christian people.

Thus every single person born as a human being upon earth, regardless of the religion or nationality of his or her parents, may, under the right conditions, be reborn as a Christian.^{ix} The Old Covenant was

an *exclusive* one, limited to a certain human extended family; the New Covenant is an *inclusive* one, that seeks to take in all of humanity.

Anyone who comes to believe in Jesus Christ the Son of God may become a Christian simply by receiving the Sacrament of Baptism.^x

3. Just as the people of the New Israel are no longer limited to one tribe bound together by ties of blood, so the priesthood of the New Covenant is no longer an hereditary clan.

Under the Mosaic Covenant, the Priests of Israel were the lineal descendants of Moses' brother, Aaron.^{xi} However, as early as the time of Abraham, the Israelites-in-formation were briefly introduced, by way of prophecy, to a new form of ministry in the person of the mysterious Melchizedek [**Mel-KIZ-uh-deck**], King of Salem.^{xii}

In the Old Israel, the priesthood was restricted to just one family, just as membership in the Covenant People was restricted to one tribe; in the New Israel, the priesthood is open to all adult males who are called thereto by the Holy Spirit, just as membership in the Covenant People is now open to all persons who respond to Christ's call to them.

Conclusion:

So what was the most important teaching that Christ was conveying to His followers when He said, "Behold my mother and my brethren! For whosoever shall do the will of God, the same is my brother, and my sister, and mother"?

He was telling His hearers that in the new, divine, Sacramental family into which Christians are reborn in Baptism, *all* other Christians who have similarly been reborn into that sacred family are their kinsfolk, their brothers, their sisters, and their parents. Because it is divine in its origin, the new family and the new family relationships based on sacramental rebirth must take precedence over the old family relationships based on biological birth.

Our biological births brought us into this world, but only our Sacramental rebirths can take us safely out of this world. Just as the task

of the human newborn is to grow into a responsible, fully-functional adult, the task of the Sacramental reborn is to grow into a faithful, responsible, and responsible Christian, a citizen of the Kingdom of God. In both those cases, our physical deaths here on earth mark the end of that period of differing forms of growth and, with it, the end of our chance to become people who will live for eternity in the presence of God.

Thus the overwhelming importance of our new Sacramental family, composed of those who taught us to know and accept Jesus, taught us to profess our faith in Jesus, brought us to the Baptism by which we put on Jesus, guided our growth in love and acceptance of Jesus, and supported us as we struggle to live the life Jesus would have us live. If our human, biological families are also among that Sacramental family, then we are doubly blessed.

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

ⁱⁱ *Ecclesiasticus 17: 1-15 (KJV).*

ⁱⁱⁱ *I.e., the five senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch.*

^{iv} *St. Mark 3: 20-21, 31-35 (KJV).*

^v *St. Mark 3: 34-35 (KV).*

^{vi} *The Ist Commandment, Exodus 20: 2-3 (KJV); cf. THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 68 (PECUSA 1928).*

^{vii} *Cf. 8 FRANCIS J. HALL, DOGMATIC THEOLOGY: THE CHURCH AND THE SACRAMENTAL SYSTEM 41 (1967).*

^{viii} *Cf. HALL, op. cit. 39.*

^{ix} *Ibid.*

^x *Cf. HALL, op. cit. 87.*

^{xi} *Exodus 28: 1.*

^{xii} *Genesis 14: 18-20; Hebrews 5: 5-10.*

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