

Sermon for Morning Prayer The Thirteenth Sunday After Trinity

Lessons:ⁱ

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the seventeenth Chapter of the Wisdom of Jesus, 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, 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, ears, and a heart, gave he them to understand. Withal he filled them with the knowledge of understanding, and shewed [SHOWD] them good and evil. He set his eye upon their hearts, that he might shew [SHOW] them the greatness of his works. He gave them to glory in his marvellous acts for ever, 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 shewed 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 neighbour. 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.ⁱⁱⁱ

“. . . 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 First Lesson: “He bestowed knowledge upon them, and allotted to them the law of life. He established with them an eternal covenant, and showed them his judgments.”^{iv} In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Introduction:

As Christians, we often meet people who try to persuade us that we do not need to struggle to conform our daily lives to any commandments of God’s. Sometimes these people simply argue that there is no God and so there can be no commandments for us to worry about. This group is, of course, easily dismissed by any well-instructed Christian.

More subtle, however, and therefore more dangerous, are those who suggest to us that even if there is a God, He, she, or it takes no interest in our daily affairs. One branch of this argument claims that God exists so far outside the realm in which we are that He, she, or it is concerned, if at all, only with broad issues such as “social justice”, “world peace”, or whatever form of ecological consciousness is currently fashionable. Another variant claims that we are simply so small and insignificant in the overall scheme of things that God has no attention to spare for us.

Theme: ^v

The ancient Jewish sage, Jesus ben Sira, wrote today’s First Lesson, to answer those who make that second argument, that is, who say we are simply too small and insignificant compared to the totality of creation for God to have any attention to spare for us as individuals.

Today's Lesson is the first fifteen verses of the seventeenth chapter of Ben Sira's book, Ecclesiasticus, or, as it is sometimes called, Sirach. We know whom he was addressing because just prior to today's portion, he writes:

“Do not say, ‘I shall be hidden from the Lord,
and who on high will remember me?
Among so many people I shall not be known,
for what is my soul in the boundless creation?’”^{vi}

Development:

Ben Sira's answer to those who would minimize God's oversight of our daily lives is framed in two parts. First, he reminds us that God created us in His own image and gave us certain gifts, especially a broad even though limited dominion over the created order and the five senses that let us apprehend that order, so that we can use that dominion and those senses to see God's works and praise Him for them.

The obvious suggestion here is that God would have been unlikely to have gone to the trouble of making us, in some senses, His deputies if He were not going to supervise the way we carry out the responsibilities He gave us.

Secondly, Ben Sira reminds us that God entered into a covenant with Israel and, as part of that covenant, revealed to us the divine Law – especially in the form of the Mosaic Commandments -- which makes possible for us both life and knowledge. Again, this implicitly suggests that we cannot uphold our part of that covenant if we do not behave ourselves according to God's prescriptions and that God would not have entered into that covenant with us unless it was, for His own reasons, important to Him. Therefore, we may conclude, the degree to which we obey Him – the degree to which we uphold the covenant -- is likewise important to Him.

Let us now follow Ben Sira's argument as it unfolds in his actual words. The first part of today's First Lesson reminds us that God created us in His own image and gave us, under Him, dominion over the created order, both plant and animal:

“The Lord created man out of earth,
and turned him back to it again.
He gave to men few days, a limited time,
but granted them authority over the things upon the earth.
He endowed them with strength like his own,
and made them in his own image.
He placed the fear of them in all living beings,
and granted them dominion over beasts and birds.”^{vii}

Our status as stewards of God’s created order did not change when the Old Israel of a tribal nation united by blood ties was replaced by the New Israel of a church united by ties of faith. Thus Ben Sira’s argument applies just as much to us as it did to his original readers.

The second part of the Lesson reminds us that God gave us our five senses -- the “five operations” -- to apprehend, and the mental capacity to appreciate, God’s works and to praise Him for them:

“They obtained the use of the five operations of the Lord;
as sixth he distributed to them the gift of mind,
and as seventh reason, the interpreter of his operations.
He made for them tongue and eyes;
he gave them ears and a mind for thinking.
He filled them with knowledge and understanding,
and showed them good and evil.
He set his eye upon their hearts
to show them the majesty of his works.
And they will praise his holy name,
to proclaim the grandeur of his works.”^{viii}

Again, our physical and spiritual natures did not change when the Old Testament of revelation was fulfilled in the New Testament of Incarnation. Our personal “operations” and our duties to God remain the same as they were before, for as Christ told us, He came to fulfill the Law, not to abrogate it: “Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them.”^{ix}

When God gave us the capacity to appreciate something of His works, and to praise Him for them, He indicated that we are important to Him. It is an old and wise principle that praise and blame are both to be measured according to the value of their source, so if God thought we were completely beneath His notice, he would not care whether we praised Him or not.

The third part of today's First Lesson reminds us that God entered into His covenant with us and, as part of that covenant, revealed to us His divine Law:

“He bestowed knowledge upon them,
and allotted to them the law of life.
He established with them an eternal covenant,
and showed them his judgments.
Their eyes saw his glorious majesty,
and their ears heard the glory of his voice.
.And he said to them, ‘Beware of all unrighteousness.’
And he gave commandment to each of them concerning his
neighbor.
Their ways are always before him,
they will not be hid from his eyes.”^x

Here we see clearly that “the law of life” is, in fact, concerned with our daily behavior, for it is a “commandment to each of them concerning his neighbor.” We also see that this “law of life” and “knowledge” are both connected together and issue forth from the same source.

As one commentator has said, “Sirach explicitly joins the economy of salvation with creation by introducing the Sinai covenant.”^{xi} Just as the moral prescriptions of that covenant remain binding on us even after the advent of Christ, so, too, this grafting together of salvation and creation remains just as important for us as it was for the ancient Israelites.

Conclusion:

This final point – about the intimate connection between “knowledge” and “the law of life” – has two implications that we should

always have before us. The first is that the “law” is a source of “life”.^{xii} This may seem strange until we consider it carefully, when we will realize that life, in any truly meaningful sense, requires that it be lived in a relationship with God. God has chosen for us the form that relationship must take: the covenant, which itself depends upon His Law. Thus the Law opens the way to the covenant, which gives us our relationship with God.

The second such implication is that “knowledge” exists only where the covenant is fulfilled,^{xiii} that is, where the “law of life” is obeyed. This was Ben Sira’s own unique insight, which influenced much of the rest of the “Wisdom Literature”, that is, that wisdom consists in large measure in obeying God. The inverse of that is that only an eternal fool deliberately disobeys God.

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

ⁱⁱ *Ecclesiasticus 17: 1-15 (KJV). For consistency with the differing titles used in the KJV and the RSV, a text from this book in the KJ translation will be cited as “Ecclesiasticus” and one in the RS translation will be cited as “Sirach”.*

ⁱⁱⁱ *St. Mark 3: 20-21, 31-35 (KJV).*

^{iv} *Sirach 17: 11-12 (RSV).*

^v *For this analysis I am indebted to Edward Lee Beavin, Ecclesiasticus or the Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach, in CHARLES M. LAYMON, ED., THE INTERPRETER’S ONE-VOLUME COMMENTARY ON THE BIBLE 560 (Abingdon Press 1971).*

^{vi} *Sirach 16: 17 (RSV).*

^{vii} *Sirach 17: 1-4 (RSV).*

^{viii} *Sirach 17: 5-10 (RSV).*

^{ix} *St. Matthew 5: 17 (RSV).*

^x *Sirach 17: 11-15 (RSV).*

^{xi} *Thomas H. Weber, Sirach in 1 RAYMOND E. BROWN, JOSEPH A. FITZMYER, AND ROLAND E. MURPHY, EDS., THE JEROME BIBLICAL COMMENTARY 546 (Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1968).*

^{xii} *Beavin, op. cit.*

^{xiii} *Ecclesiastes 24: 1-23; Beavin, op. cit. and at 564.*

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