

## SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER

### The Second Sunday after Trinity<sup>1</sup>

#### Lessons:<sup>2</sup>

**The First Lesson:** here beginneth the thirteenth Verse of the thirty-first Chapter of the Book of Job.<sup>3</sup>

“... If I did despise the cause of my manservant or of my maidervant, when they contended with me; What then shall I do when God riseth up? and when he visiteth, what shall I answer him? Did not he that made me in the womb make him? and did not one fashion us in the womb? If I have withheld the poor from their desire, or have caused the eyes of the widow to fail; Or have eaten my morsel myself alone, and the fatherless hath not eaten thereof; (For from my youth he was brought up with me, as with a father, and I have guided her from my mother’s womb;) If I have seen any perish for want of clothing, or any poor without covering; If his loins have not blessed me, and if he were not warmed with the fleece of my sheep; If I have lifted up my hand against the fatherless, when I saw my help in the gate: Then let mine arm fall from my shoulder blade, and mine arm be broken from the bone. For destruction from God was a terror to me, and by reason of his highness I could not endure. If I have made gold my hope, or have said to the fine gold, Thou art my confidence; If I rejoiced because my wealth was great, and because mine hand had gotten much; If I beheld the sun when it shined, or the moon walking in brightness; And my heart hath been secretly enticed, or my mouth hath kissed my hand: This also were an iniquity to be punished by the judge: for I should have denied the God that is above.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

**The Second Lesson:** Here beginneth the thirteenth Chapter of the First Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians.<sup>4</sup>

“Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all

knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing. Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

**Text:**

From the Second Lesson: “[A]s for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect; but when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away.”<sup>5</sup> In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

**Development:**

Throughout Scripture, Prophecies—at least true prophecies, the ones that come as the result of divine inspiration--are regarded as good things. After all, real prophecies are messages from God and we can never hear enough from that source. Knowledge is similar. And “tongues”—by which, of course, St. Paul means *glossolalia*, the phenomenon sometimes known as “speaking in tongues”—is likewise tradi-

tionally regarded as good, for it is also seen as something that happens only under the inspiration of the Third Person of the Trinity, that is, of God the Holy Spirit.

From this perspective, the principal difference between prophecy and knowledge, on the one hand, and speaking in tongues, on the other, is that prophecy and knowledge edify the whole people of God while speaking in tongues, uplifting and comforting as it may be, is of use primarily to the person who experiences it.

But these observations about the natures of prophecies, knowledge, and “tongues” themselves raise a question. For if these things are, in essence, good, then why does St. Paul tell us that we experience these things only in an imperfect state and when true perfection comes, they will pass away?

The answer is that here, St. Paul is discussing *spiritual gifts*.<sup>6</sup> In doing so, he compares the more dramatic and therefore obvious gifts of prophecy, knowledge, and speaking in tongues with the less obvious, but even more essential, gift of love. It is precisely because each of his three original examples, prophecy, knowledge, and speaking in tongues, occurs only at the express instigation of the Holy Spirit that each of them is a gift from that Spirit to us. In fact, these are among the several benefits of the Spirit to which, we are taught, we will receive special access in the Sacrament of Confirmation.

And love, although in some ways less obvious than those three, or, indeed, than any of the other “sevenfold Gifts of the Spirit”, is similarly the product of a divine spirit. It is, moreover, preëminently a gift that works to build up the Body of Christ, for it is love that is the most characteristic Christian virtue and that most significantly distinguishes committed Christians from the world around them.

But if that is so, then why does Paul say these gifts are destined to pass away? And why does he tell us that, important as prophecy, knowledge, and the gift of tongues, the gift of love is greater? The answer to those questions lies in the implications of the whole passage that forms today’s Epistle.

That implication is that most of the gifts of the Spirit, including prophecy, knowledge, and “tongues”, are given for our strengthening and uplift in this present world, to assist us on our journey toward *perfection*, or, to paraphrase the Army’s onetime recruiting slogan, our quest to “be all we can be”. But these are *mediate*, not *immediate* goods. That is, they are means to some other ends, not ends in themselves.

When Paul tells us things are presently imperfect but that they will one day be perfect, he is telling us that we are engaged in a process of perfection. When and if that process reaches its intended end, we will find ourselves living forever in the presence of perfection, which, along with ultimate love, is what God is.

Thus, where prophecy, knowledge, “tongues”, and the other typical Gifts of the Spirit are temporary in nature, intended to uplift us in this first, preliminary, earthly phase of our existence, love is permanent in nature. It will be a prominent feature of the later, heavenly phase of our existence. And then, at that point in our development, no intermediary forms of assistance will be needed for us to reach toward God. In other words, when we have achieved what theologians call “the beatific vision”, we will have direct, that is, immediate, access to the source of all goodness, so we will have no need of props or aids.<sup>7</sup>

In my father’s youth, in the very early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, there was a humorous colloquialism that expressed the ultimate state of something: “than which there is no than which-er”. If ever that phrase applied accurately to anything, it certainly applies to the prospect of dwelling in eternity with the divinity, something so perfect that there can be nothing else more perfect than it is.

So that is the first lesson I would have you remember from today’s Epistle: if we are doing what God wishes us to do, that is, if we are doing what Christians are meant to do, then we are on a journey toward ultimate perfection.

The second lesson I would have you remember here is that God has given us certain means of support or assistance to help us along that journey. Among these helps or aids are the Gifts of the Spirit to which we have already had reference.

But there is also a third lesson here, one that comes both from implications we can and should draw from the first two and also that, sadly, comes inescapably from our own experience. It is that, just as God has given us aids and helps to assist our journey toward perfection, so, too, there are on that same journey other influences, obstacles and traps, that work to retard our progress and even to frustrate it entirely.

### **Conclusion:**

It does not require a degree in theology to understand what these hindrances may be. The moment that we consider that they are the things that make it difficult—sometimes impossible—for us to draw near to God, then it is obvious that when we speak of these adverse influences, we are speaking of sin.

For the essence of sin is that it is what separates us from God. That is the teaching of the account in Genesis<sup>8</sup> of the Fall of Man: sin is disobedience of God's will for us and that disobedience, when too profound or prolonged, constitutes a barrier between us and God.

So on that journey toward perfection to which St. Paul referred, that quest for the presence of God which will make irrelevant all intermediaries and aids such as spiritual gifts, the most important part for us is the struggle to overcome those barriers that we ourselves erect against God. Christ died to make it possible for us to be saved; no one but we ourselves can prevent His sacrifice from being effective for that purpose.

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The Rev'd Canon John A. Hollister, JD<sup>9</sup>  
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<sup>1</sup> This sermon was originally written on the Epistle for Holy Communion on Quinquagesima Sunday, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxvi (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

<sup>3</sup> Job 31:13-28 (KJV).

<sup>4</sup> I Corinthians 13:1-13 (KJV).

<sup>5</sup> I Corinthians 13:8-10 (RSV).

<sup>6</sup> HERBERT G. MAY & BRUCE M. METZGER, eds., THE NEW OXFORD ANNOTATED BIBLE WITH THE APOCRYPHA, REVISED STANDARD VERSION 1392 fn. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1977).

<sup>7</sup> *Norman Hillyer, 1 Corinthians*, in D. GUTHRIE AND J. A. MOTYER, eds., THE NEW BIBLE COMMENTARY REVISED, 3rd Ed. 1068 (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970).

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 3.

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