

Sermon for Morning Prayer The Fifth Sunday After Trinity

Lessons:

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the second Chapter of Ecclesiastes, or The Preacher.

“I said in mine heart, Go to now, I will prove thee with mirth, therefore enjoy pleasure: and, behold, this also is vanity. I said of laughter, It is mad: and of mirth, What doeth it? I sought in mine heart to give myself unto wine, yet acquainting mine heart with wisdom; and to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was that good for the sons of men, which they should do under the heaven all the days of their life. I made me great works; I builded me houses; I planted me vineyards: I made me gardens and orchards, and I planted trees in them of all kind of fruits: I made me pools of water, to water therewith the wood that bringeth forth trees: I got me servants and maidens, and had servants born in my house; also I had great possessions of great and small cattle above all that were in Jerusalem before me: I gathered me also silver and gold, and the peculiar treasure of kings and of the provinces: I gat me men singers and women singers, and the delights of the sons of men, as musical instruments, and that of all sorts. So I was great, and increased more than all that were before me in Jerusalem: also my wisdom remained with me. And whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them, I withheld not my heart from any joy; for my heart rejoiced in all my labour: and this was my portion of all my labour. Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun.

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“Yea, I hated all my labour which I had taken under the sun: because I should leave it unto the man that shall be after me. And who knoweth whether he shall be a wise man or a fool? yet shall he have rule over all my labour wherein I have laboured, and wherein I have shewed myself wise under the sun. This is also vanity. Therefore I went about to cause my heart to despair of all the labour which I took under the sun. For there is a man whose labour is in wisdom, and in knowledge, and in equity; yet to a man that hath not laboured therein shall he leave it for his portion. This also is vanity and a great evil. For what hath man of all his labour, and of the

vexation of his heart, wherein he hath laboured under the sun? For all his days are sorrows, and his travail grief; yea, his heart taketh not rest in the night. This is also vanity.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the sixteenth Verse of the nineteenth Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Matthew.

“And, behold, one came and said unto him, Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life? And he said unto him, Why callest thou me good? there is none good but one, that is, God: but if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments. He saith unto him, Which? Jesus said, Thou shalt do no murder, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Honour thy father and thy mother: and, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. The young man saith unto him, All these things have I kept from my youth up: what lack I yet? Jesus said unto him, If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me. But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful: for he had great possessions.

“Then said Jesus unto his disciples, Verily I say unto you, That a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven. And again I say unto you, It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God. When his disciples heard it, they were exceedingly amazed, saying, Who then can be saved? But Jesus beheld them, and said unto them, With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible.

“Then answered Peter and said unto him, Behold, we have forsaken all, and followed thee; what shall we have therefore? And Jesus said unto them, Verily I say unto you, That ye which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my name’s sake, shall receive an hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life. But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.” In the Name of the Father, and of the † Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Introduction, Theme, and Development:

“It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.” This is a popular text, so popular it is probably one part of the Bible that almost anyone can quote without a moment’s thought. It is particularly popular with those who are trying to separate the rich from some of their riches, such as the televangelists, as well as with those who are trying to stir up resentment toward the rich.

Both of those groups, however, miss the point of Our Lord’s lesson. Often, after making such a terse and proverbial statement, He explained to His disciples what it meant, as He did with the parable of the sower of seed. Here, however, He did not explain His meaning in words.

Instead, the explanation is to be found in the action that immediately precedes His statement. He is summarizing the effect of what has just happened, which was His conversation with a rich young man who wanted to know what he needed to do in order to be saved. There, the explanation is in that young man’s reaction to what Our Lord told him: he found it too difficult to detach himself from his worldly baggage, and so he walked away rather than continue his search for salvation.

Notice what he actually said to Jesus, “Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?” Notice he said “what good thing shall I do”, strongly implying he wanted to be told something he could do just once and so have all the trouble and bother of salvation over and done with.

In other words, he wanted a quick and easy recipe for salvation. Quick and easy recipes are always popular, which is why those televangelists are also always popular, but quick and easy recipes do not always produce the best products. Nor are those who search only for quick and easy recipes usually the best cooks.

The lesson of Our Lord's statement is explained in considerable detail in today's First Lesson. The Preacher's whole point there is the "vanity", that is, the pointlessness, of undue attachment to material things. They are too impermanent to be reliable props in this life and the always-looming cause of that impermanence is our own death. However great our wealth, however wide our acclaim, each and every one of us will eventually die, at which time we will be in precisely the same position as will the poorest and least known of souls. As the Preacher reminds us, whatever we have built up during this life, if it survives us, it will only be enjoyed by someone else.

Jesus Himself placed His seal of approval on that observation when He told the parable of the rich man who congratulated himself on his plentiful harvest, and planned to build new barns in which to store his bounty, only to be called home that same night, leaving his wealth to be enjoyed by his heir.

St. Luke's account of that particular parable is particularly instructive because it makes clear that it is not the *possession* of wealth that is the problem, it is the *undue degree of attachment* to wealth, that so often accompanies its possession, that creates the difficulty. Thus St. Luke's account opens with Our Lord's injunction, "Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth."

So, finally, there is the key: it is *covetousness*, our excessive devotion to material things, that is to be avoided. But then, we, like the rich young man who inquired of Jesus, should have known that already, for we, like him, have been instructed over and over again: "Thou shalt not covet."

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*The Rev'd Canon John A. Hollister, J.D.
July 12, 2009.*

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

2 Ecclesiastes 2:1-11, 18-23 (KJV).

3 St. Matthew 19:16-30 (KJV).

4 *St. Matthew 19:24 (KJV).*

5 *Cf. St. Matthew 13:3-8, 18-23.*

6 *St. Matthew 19:16 (KJV).*

7 *St. Luke 12:15-21.*

8 *St. Luke 12:15 (KJV).*

9 *The Order for the Administration of the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion,
THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 69 (PECUSA 1928/1943).*

10 *Priest Associate, Christ Anglican Catholic Church, New Orleans (Metairie),
LA. Honorary Canon, the Diocese of the Resurrection, and Honorary
Canon and Canon to the Ordinary, The Diocese of New Orleans,
The Anglican Catholic Church.*