

Sermon for Morning Prayer

Trinity VIII, 2002

Lessons:

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the eighteenth Verse of the first Chapter of The Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach, or Ecclesiasticus:

“The fear of the Lord is a crown of wisdom, making peace and perfect health to flourish; both which are the gifts of God: and it enlargeth their rejoicing that love him. Wisdom raineth down skill and knowledge of understanding, and exalteth them to honour that hold her fast. The root of wisdom is to fear the Lord, and the branches thereof are long life. The fear of the Lord driveth away sins: and where it is present, it turneth away wrath. A furious man cannot be justified; for the sway of his fury shall be his destruction. A patient man will bear for a time, and afterward joy shall spring up unto him. He will hide his words for a time, and the lips of many shall declare his wisdom. The parables of knowledge are in the treasures of wisdom: but godliness is an abomination to a sinner. If thou desire wisdom, keep the commandments, and the Lord shall give her unto thee. For the fear of the Lord is wisdom and instruction: and faith and meekness are his delight.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the fourteenth Verse of the seventh Chapter of the Gospel according to St. John.

“Now about the midst of the feast Jesus went up into the temple, and taught. And the Jews marveled, saying, How knoweth this man letters, having never learned? Jesus answered them, and said, My doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me. If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or *whether* I speak it of myself. He that speaketh of himself seeketh his own glory: but he that seeketh his glory, that sent him, the same is true, and no unrighteousness is in him. Did not Moses give you the law, and *yet* none of you keepeth the Law? Why go ye about to kill me? The people answered and said, Thou hast a devil: who goeth about to kill thee? Jesus answered and said unto them, I have done one work, and ye all marvel. Moses therefore gave unto you circumcision; (not because it is of Moses,

but of the fathers;) and ye on the Sabbath day circumcise a man. If a man on the Sabbath day receive circumcision, that the law of Moses should not be broken; are ye angry at me, because I have made a man every whit whole on the Sabbath day? Judge not according to the appearance, but judge righteous judgment.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the First Lesson: “[T]he fear of the Lord driveth away sins: and where it is present, it turneth away wrath.”

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

Introduction:

“The fear of the Lord” is something about which we do not often hear these days. It is not “politically correct” to suggest that there is a God, so how much more “incorrect” is it to suggest that not only is there a God, but that He is a God who must be feared. After all, if we must fear Him, that means either that He is capable of getting angry, or that He will at some time actually pass judgment on what we do here on earth, or both.

Our ancestors believed that both those things were true and, as a result, they truly feared God because they feared what He might do to them if they angered Him or gave Him cause to pass judgment on them. As a result, the societies they built very frequently reflected that fear.

Theme:

Today, many people in Western society do not believe there is a God; many more believe there is – or at least, may be – a God but He/She/It does not take any personal interest in human affairs. Even most of those who believe in a personal God do not, in their hearts of hearts, believe He will ever become angry with *them* for what they do or will ever pass judgment upon *them* for what they have done, however roughly He may handle others whose intentions have not been quite as impeccable as those believers think their own are.

Just as our ancestors' societies tended to reflect their belief that God could, indeed, become angry and that He would, indeed, pass judgment on His people, so our society today reflects very clearly the contemporary belief that what we do here on earth will never catch God's attention in any way that we might find unpleasant.

Development:

The evidence for this is as close as your daily newspaper or the evening news on your T.V. The Chairmen and Chief Executive officers of publicly-traded corporations lie to the Securities and Exchange Commission about the profitability of their companies and trade on inside information in their companies' stocks. A Congressman is indicted for, and convicted of, using his office to extort kickbacks and selling his influence to people who wanted to do business with the Federal government. Priests of the Church molest young people who were entrusted to their care; Bishops of the Church, who are supposed to be the pastors of their dioceses, protect and cover up for those perverts and, when the victims complain, attack the victims instead of healing them.

Would anyone, believer or nonbeliever alike, think for one moment that any one of these men could do what they did if they actually believed that God might become angry with him for what he did or that he might, at some time, have to stand before God to give an account of his actions?

That is one of those propositions about which it can actually be said that to state it is to prove its truth.

1. The fear of the Lord is a very healthy corrective to that strong, inborn tendency in all of us to do wrong that we call, somewhat confusingly, "Original Sin".

G. K. Chesterton, the great English defender and exponent of Christianity, once said that Original Sin is the only doctrine of the Church that is empirically verifiable: all you have to do is look around you at how people actually behave. Now "Original Sin" is the theologians' somewhat misleading title not for the type of sin that we actually commit but instead for the tendency, inborn in each of us as part of our human heritage, to do those things that separate us from God.

Our principal weapon against this inborn tendency to separate ourselves from God is itself literally a gift from God. It is *grace*, a word that comes from the Latin word “gratia” which itself means simply “gift”. This “grace”, which is the gift of God, is actually the presence of God with us and in us, so we can say that it is God’s gift to us of Himself.

We are told in Article 10 of the *Articles of Religion*, which you will find printed at the very end of your Prayer Books, we must coöperate with that “grace” and permit it to work in us. Today’s First Lesson tells us that the fear of the Lord is a mighty incentive toward that coöperation when it says: “The fear of the Lord driveth away sins: and where it is present, it turneth away wrath.”

The “wrath” that is thus turned away from us is, of course, quite literally the Wrath of God.

When a member of the Church is Confirmed, the Bishop prays that the confirmand will receive “the sevenfold gifts of the Holy Spirit”. As one of those special prayers for specific gifts of the Spirit he says, “[F]ill them, O Lord, with the spirit of thy holy fear, now and for ever.” This tells us, first, that the fear of the Lord is a true gift, not a burden and, second, that it is a gift that we must seek if we wish to live as fully Christian a life as lies within our powers.

2. Which do we fear more, the Lord or the world?

The world today does not care for true religion; indeed, large parts of it actually hate religion and religious people. As St. John said in one of last week’s Lessons for Morning Prayer,

“If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you. If ye were of the world, the world would love its own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you.”

Just as the world disdains godly people, so it disdains godly knowledge and behavior.

Therefore, each of us must answer for ourselves a very fundamental question: “Will I conform myself to what the world wants me to be or will I conform myself to what the Lord wants me to be?”

There are many ways we allow our fear of the world to dictate to us what our standards and behavior should be. Some of us live in terror that our neighbors will disapprove of what we do; some are worried that self-anointed academic or media “experts” will make fun of what we think; some are concerned that our employers may disapprove of our beliefs and so put our jobs in jeopardy if we seem to be too Christian.

After all, we live in a society where it is acceptable to hold and preach any type of belief, or non-belief, be it pagan, “New Age”, Eastern religion, witchcraft, voodoo, or whatever. Even terrorists who say Islam promotes murder find their apologists among trendy Western commentators and columnists.

There is only *one* belief system that is universally decried by Hollywood, by the media mavens, and by the academics. That is Christianity. It takes only one example to demonstrate the truth of this claim: a public school teacher in this country can talk to students about Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, Taoism [DOW-ism], Animism, or almost any other “ism”, may even insist that those students practice Muslim prayers or other religious exercises, all in the name of “Multiculturalism” and “respecting the beliefs of others”.

Woe betide that teacher, however, should anything be said in that classroom that could be interpreted as discussing Christianity; if it is, then that will become, quite literally, a Supreme Court case. All religions are *not* equal in our world; Christianity is a second-class one and is the only one about which almost everyone out there agrees must not be given equal time.

This is the point of today’s First Lesson when it says, “The parables of knowledge are in the treasures of wisdom: but godliness is an abomination to a sinner.” In light of this, and in light of the world’s pervasive hostility toward Christianity, each of us must decide for himself or for herself:

“Which do I fear to the point that I will let it rule my life, God or the world?”

3. For those who choose God over the world, their path is clear.

I think I can safely assume that every one of you who took the trouble to show up here this morning is willing, at the very least, to give God a fair hearing and not just line up unthinkingly on the side of the world. How, then, can the people like us, who choose God over the world, find out what we must do to make that choice effective, to live out our Christian calling?

The answer, fortunately, is rather simple. Of course, all great ideas *are* simple, it is putting them into practice that is extraordinarily difficult. In this case, the First Lesson this morning tells us, “If thou desire wisdom, keep the commandments, and the Lord shall give her unto thee. For the fear of the Lord is wisdom and instruction: and faith and meekness are his delight.”

Jesus ben Sirach, the author of that passage, is telling us that if we truly fear the Lord, our conduct will almost automatically tend toward that which the Lord would have us do. That is one of the reasons the confirming Bishop prays that the confirmands will receive the spiritual gift of the fear of the Lord: for the rest of their lives, it will help guide their steps into the paths marked out by Him.

Those who truly fear the Lord will not be content with merely hoping they will happen onto the right way, however. They will take measures to assure that, so far as they are able, they will discover what it is that the Lord has in mind for them to do. What then will these measures be?

Prayer is certainly the first thing we should do: we should pray constantly to know what God wants for us. While the economy of prayer is shrouded in mystery, one thing that is clear is that in some way our prayers are useful to God in His attempts to reach us and give to us. Studying Scripture is another thing we should do: learning how others before us have lived faithfully in the Lord tells us what the Lord may wish for us and gives us useful guidance in how we should bear ourselves. Also, there is a special grace in reading Scripture, just as there is in prayer, that opens us up to the mind of God and makes it easier for Him to speak to us.

However, except perhaps for a few anthropologists or literary scholars, no one is likely to read Scripture who does not fear God at least enough to want to learn about Him. Certainly no one who does not fear God is likely to pray to him on any pretext whatever, unless that person sees God as just the deity of a cargo cult:

someone who inexplicably pours good things from an unknown world onto His worshippers merely because He is asked for them. For those of us who have a more mature view of God, the fear of the Lord is the wellspring of our attempts to know Him.

Conclusion:

How does all this apply to us, in our daily lives? I suggest that once we have answered the question, “Which do I fear to the point I will let it rule my life, God or the world?”, and if our answer to that question is “God”, then each of us has one further question to ask himself or herself.

The second question is, “Am I doing everything in my power to get to know God, and to learn what He wishes from me? Am I praying daily for knowledge of His will and am I regularly studying the Scriptures?”

An honest answer to that second question will tell us whether we truly fear the Lord enough to let Him rule our lives and will also tell us what we need to be doing in our daily lives in response to that salutary fear or to our lack of it.

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The Rev'd Canon John A. Hollister

1 Book of Common Prayer (PECUSA 1928), Lectionary of 1943.

2 Ecclesiasticus 1:21 (KJV).

3 “Original sin ... is the fault and corruption of the Nature of every man ... whereby man is very far gone from original righteousness, and is of his own nature inclined to evil, so that the flesh lusteth always contrary to the Spirit....” Article 9, Articles of Religion, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 604 (PECUSA 1928).

4 “The condition of Man after the fall of Adam is such, that he cannot turn and prepare himself, by his own natural strength and good works, to faith, and calling upon God. Wherefore we have no power to do good works pleasant and acceptable to God, without the grace of God by Christ preventing [i.e., “going before”] us, that we may have a good will, and working with us, when we have that good will.” Article 10, Articles

of Religion, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 604-05 (PECUSA 1928).

5 Ecclesiasticus 1:21 (KJV).

6 The Order of Confirmation, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 297 (PECUSA 1928).

7 St. John 15:18-19 (KJV).

8 Ecclesiasticus 1:25 (KJV).

9 Ecclesiasticus 1:26 (KJV).

10 Curate, St. Mary's Anglican Catholic Church, Akron, Ohio.