

**SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER**  
**The Fifth Sunday after Easter, or Rogation Sunday**

**The Rev. Warren E. Shaw, Priest-in-Charge**

**Lessons:**<sup>i</sup>

**First Lesson:** Here beginneth the twenty-fifth Verse of the thirty-fourth Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel.<sup>ii</sup>

“And I will make with them a covenant of peace, and will cause the evil beasts to cease out of the land: and they shall dwell safely in the wilderness, and sleep in the woods. And I will make them and the places round about my hill a blessing; and I will cause the shower to come down in his season; there shall be showers of blessing. And the tree of the field shall yield her fruit, and the earth shall yield her increase, and they shall be safe in their land, and shall know that I am the LORD, when I have broken the bands of their yoke, and delivered them out of the hand of those that served themselves of them. And they shall no more be a prey to the heathen, neither shall the beast of the land devour them; but they shall dwell safely, and none shall make them afraid. And I will raise up for them a plant of renown, and they shall be no more consumed with hunger in the land, neither bear the shame of the heathen any more. Thus shall they know that I the Lord their God am with them, and that they, even the house of Israel, are my people, saith the Lord God. And ye my flock, the flock of my pasture, are men, and I am your God, saith [SETH] the Lord God.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

**The Second Lesson:** Here beginneth the eleventh Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Luke.<sup>iii</sup>

“And it came to pass, that, as he was praying in a certain place, when he ceased, one of his disciples said unto him, Lord, teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples. And he said unto them, When ye pray, say, Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, as in heaven, so in earth. Give us day by day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins; for we also forgive

every one that is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil.

“And he said unto them, Which of you shall have a friend, and shall go unto him at midnight, and say unto him, Friend, lend me three loaves; For a friend of mine in his journey is come to me, and I have nothing to set before him? And he from within shall answer and say, Trouble me not: the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot rise and give thee. I say unto you, Though he will not rise and give him, because he is his friend, yet because of his importunity he will rise and give him as many as he needeth. And I say unto you, Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you. For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened. If a son shall ask bread of any of you that is a father, will he give him a stone? or if he ask a fish, will he for a fish give him a serpent? Or if he shall ask an egg, will he offer him a scorpion? If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children: how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

### **Text:**

From the Second Lesson: “If you, then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your heavenly father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?”<sup>iv</sup> In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

### **Homily:**

I once heard someone say, perhaps it was one of my professors, that there are passages in the Bible that are not hard to understand but that are easy to misunderstand. The New Testament lesson for today is a case in point. In the story, a man doesn't want to get out of bed in the middle of the night and disturb his entire household in order to do a favor for a neighbor, but he eventually does it because the neighbor pesters him until he does. We can all understand that and perhaps identify with that.

People read that story and think that's what it takes to get God to answer their prayers. If we pray long enough and hard enough, God will eventually do what we want Him to. But the subsequent analogy makes clear that God is not at all like that. This is an analogy of contrast. Jesus says, "I say unto you, ask and it shall be given you; seek and ye shall find; knock and it shall be opened."

He then goes on to offer an analogy that reflects the true nature of God: "If you, then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your heavenly father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?"

The operative word here is "good". The man who had an unexpected visitor in the middle of the night was asking for something that was good and something he really needed. A friend had come on a long journey, and Middle Eastern hospitality demanded that he be fed regardless of the time. But the man that the host woke up was undoubtedly annoyed that his neighbor had not anticipated his friend's visit and was not prepared for it. Everybody in that culture was expected to keep food on hand for such a situation.

But the man who was asked for a loan of food was not as understanding or forgiving as God. He had to be nagged into doing the right thing. Jesus says that God, by contrast, is like a loving Father who is anxious to give good things to His children and will surely respond to our requests. "Everyone that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him who knocks, it shall be opened.

The only thing is, we have to ask for the right things. God is a wise as well as a loving Father. He is not a magic genie at our service, and prayer is not a vehicle for wish fulfillment. God wants to give us what we need, and He wants us to ask for what we need, but we have to understand that what we need is not necessarily what we want.

St. Paul asked God three times to heal what he called "a thorn in the flesh" and "a messenger of Satan". God's response every time was not what the Apostle wanted to hear: "My grace is sufficient for you." God was not going to remove Paul's problem. He was going to help Paul deal with it. After three times, the Apostle stopped asking.

Jesus asked only once to be relieved of the burden of His Passion and death. He did not persist in that request but quickly added, “nevertheless, not my will but thine be done.”

God has a way of taking evil things and using them to accomplish good. That is what God was doing with Jesus on the Cross and it is also what he was doing with Paul in his affliction, whatever it was. I can speculate that perhaps God intended for Paul to have to travel with a personal physician. That physician happened to be St. Luke, who undoubtedly learned from his travels with St. Paul and eventually gave us both the book of Acts and the Gospel that bears his name.

Now I don’t mean to read things into Scripture that are not there, but I’m trying to make a point. God sometimes allows things that are evil to remain in our lives, even when we pray to have them removed, but He always has a very good reason and we benefit in the long run from what He does not give us as well as from what He does.

There is a Collect in the Prayer Book that goes like this: “Let thy merciful ears, O Lord, be open to the prayers of thy humble servants; and, that they may obtain their petitions, make them to ask such things as shall please thee.” Another Collect says: “Grant unto thy people that they may love the thing which thou commandest, and desire that which thou doest promise.” Our prayers are always answered when we learn to ask for the right things.

So how do we know what are the right things? What are some of the blessings that God wants us to ask for? Surprisingly, they are some of the very things we think we need to offer to God. Such blessings as faith, piety, and virtue are gifts that God is most anxious give us, but so often we do not think of them as gifts that God gives in response to prayer. We think of them as things we need to develop on our own so we can offer them to God in order to obtain from Him what we really want, such as a better job, a recovery from sickness, or success in whatever venture we have decided to undertake.

There is really nothing wrong with praying for those things, but there is something wrong with thinking that the more pious and virtuous

we are, and the more persistent we are in our prayers, the more likely it is that God will hear our prayers and give us what we want. I am often asked to pray for people who seem to think that my prayers are likely to be heard because, as a priest, I am presumed to be holy and have influence with the Almighty. Wrong on all counts.

Virtue and faith and piety are among the many good gifts that God gives to those who ask for them. They are not things we offer to God. They are blessings He bestows upon us. The same is true of forgiveness, and love, and salvation, and hope, and all the other things that make for Godly character. Those are the gifts we really need but often think we can do without.

God does want us to pray for our daily bread, because by so doing we acknowledge that it comes from Him. But he wants us even more to pray for the gift of holy spirit (and the Greek text, by the way, does not include the definite article.), because by asking we acknowledge that we need the holy breath of God, in order to live.<sup>v</sup> “If you, then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your heavenly father give holy spirit to those who ask him?”

One more thing and I will close. The ability to pray is itself a gift of God. St. Paul says, “We do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sounds too deep for words.”

If you need to learn how to pray, then ask God to teach you. It was in response to that very request on the part of His disciples that Jesus gave them what we call “The Lord’s Prayer.” He gave them the very words to say, and you too may use those words. You may also use the words of the Prayer Book, for those prayers have been tested over time and proven to be effective in drawing us closer to the Father who is waiting to bless us.

“If you, then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your heavenly father give holy spirit to those who ask him?”

--oo0oo--

St. David's Anglican Catholic Church  
Charlottesville, Virginia  
May 13, 2012

---

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

<sup>ii</sup> *Ezekiel 34:25- 31(KJV).*

<sup>iii</sup> *St. Luke 11:1-13 (MCV).*

<sup>iv</sup> *St. Luke 11:13.*

<sup>v</sup> *In Greek, the word pneuma carries the triple meanings of “breath”, “wind”, and “spirit”.*