

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER
The Twenty-Third Sunday after Trinity

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

Lessons:¹

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the thirty-fourth Chapter of the Fifth Book of Moses, called Deuteronomy.²

“And Moses went up from the plains of Moab unto the mountain of Nebo [**KNEE-bow**], to the top of Pisgah [**PIZZ-guh**], that is over against Jericho. And the LORD shewed [**SHOWD**] him all the land of Gilead, unto Dan, And all Naphtali [**NAFF-tuh-lee**], and the land of Ephraim [**EE-frih-imm**], and Manasseh, and all the land of Judah, unto the utmost sea, And the south, and the plain of the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees, unto Zoar [**ZOH-urr**]. And the LORD said unto him, This is the land which I swear unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, saying, I will give it unto thy seed: I have caused thee to see it with thine eyes, but thou shalt not go over thither.

“So Moses the servant of the LORD died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the LORD. And he buried him in a valley in the land of Moab, over against Bethpeor [**beth-PEA-oar**]: but no man knoweth of his sepulchre unto this day.

“And Moses was an hundred and twenty years old when he died: his eye was not dim, nor his natural force abated.

“And the children of Israel wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days: so the days of weeping and mourning for Moses were ended.

“And Joshua the son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom; for Moses had laid his hands upon him: and the children of Israel hearkened unto him, and did as the LORD commanded Moses.

“And there arose not a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face, In all the signs and the wonders, which the LORD sent him to do in the land of Egypt to Pharaoh, and to all his servants, and to all his land, And in all that mighty hand, and in all the great terror which Moses shewed [**SHOWD**] in the sight of all Israel.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the fourth Chapter of the Second Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to Timothy.³

“I charge thee therefore before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom; Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all long suffering and doctrine. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables. But watch thou in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry. For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Homily:

In the second lesson for today, St. Paul is contemplating his own death, which he believes is imminent. He does not see that as a tragedy, he sees it simply as the end of his work on earth. He calls it the time of his departure. “I have fought the good fight,” he says. And that fight, as our baptismal rite tells is, is a fight “against, sin, the world, and the devil.”

“I have finished the course,” he continues. “I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness which the Lord will give me on that day.” This is a reference to the Greek athletic events in which the winners were given crowns woven from olive

branches or laurel. It may also be a reference to a scene depicted in the apocryphal book of II Esdras.

There is some disagreement about when that book was written and whether St. Paul had access to it, but let me read the passage to you:

“I, Ezra, saw on Mount Zion a great multitude which I could not number, and they were all praising the Lord with songs. In their midst was a young man of great stature, taller than any of the others, and on the head of each of them he placed a crown. But he was more glorious than they. And I was spellbound.

Then I asked an angel, “Who are these, my Lord?” He answered and said to me, “These are they who have put off mortal clothing and have put on immortal, and they have confessed the name of God. Now they are being crowned and receive palms.

Then I said to the angel, “Who is that young man who places crowns on them and puts palms in their hands?” He answered and said, “He is the Son of God, whom they confessed in the world.”

This apocryphal book was obviously written during a time when the church was under persecution, and it depicts the reward of the martyrs. That word “martyr” means a witness, and it has come to refer to those who, given a choice between death and apostasy, chose to pay the price of physical death rather than abandon their faith. They followed the words of Jesus in St. Matthew: “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”

But St. Paul does not say that the crown of righteousness will be given only to them. The Lord will give it, he says, “to all who love his appearing.” That’s good news for us.

In this country we are free to bear witness to our faith without fear of execution. But there are Christians in Africa and Asia who are being murdered even as I speak because they refuse to convert to Islam or because they go to church and read the Bible and talk about Jesus. How ashamed should we be because our witness is so feeble compared to theirs? Nevertheless, the Apostle includes, among those who will be given crowns, all of us who love the appearance of Christ on Earth and look forward to His coming again.

The psalmist says that a human life span is seventy, or perhaps, eighty years, but that is by no means guaranteed. There are people here today who have exceeded that age, and there have been many who died before reaching it. Death for us and for all men marks the end of our work in this world. It is up to God to decide when that will be. The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away on His own schedule.

St. Paul was in prison when he wrote this letter, and expected to be executed. He was prepared to die. But he also prepared himself to live. He requested Timothy to come to him and bring some things he would need to continue his work: a cloak to keep him warm as winter approaches, some books, and some parchments, which are animal skins and much more durable than papyrus. The Apostle intended to continue to serve his Lord and the church right up to the very end. And that is the attitude with which you and I must look upon our time in this world. As Yogi Berra is alleged to have said, “It ain’t over ‘til it’s over.”

In the final prayer of the Communion service we pray, “that we may do all such good works as thou hast prepared for us to walk in.” I have often wondered what those works might be. I still do. But whatever they may be, it is my duty and my privilege to do them. It is your duty and privilege as well.

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St. David’s Anglican Catholic Church
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¹ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxxviii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*

² *Deuteronomy 34 (KJV).*

³ *II Timothy 4:1-8 (KJV).*