

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER
The Fifth Sunday after Easter,
commonly called Rogation Sunday¹

Lessons:²

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the sixth Chapter of the Fifth Book of Moses, called Deuteronomy.³

“Now these are the commandments, the statutes, and the judgments, which the LORD your God commanded to teach you, that ye might do them in the land whither ye go to possess it: That thou mightest fear the LORD thy God, to keep all his statutes and his commandments, which I command thee, thou, and thy son, and thy son’s son, all the days of thy life; and that thy days may be prolonged.

“Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe to do it; that it may be well with thee, and that ye may increase mightily, as the LORD God of thy fathers hath promised thee, in the land that floweth with milk and honey. Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD: And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes. And thou shalt write them upon the posts of thy house, and on thy gates. And it shall be, when the LORD thy God shall have brought thee into the land which he sware unto thy fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give thee great and goodly cities, which thou buildedst not, And houses full of all good things, which thou filledst not, and wells digged, which thou diggedst not, vineyards and olive trees, which thou plantedst not; when thou shalt have eaten and be full; Then beware lest thou forget the LORD, which brought thee forth out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage. Thou shalt fear the LORD

thy God, and serve him, and shalt swear by his name. Ye shall not go after other gods, of the gods of the people which are round about you; (For the LORD thy God is a jealous God among you) lest the anger of the LORD thy God be kindled against thee, and destroy thee from off the face of the earth.

“Ye shall not tempt the LORD your God, as ye tempted him in Massah⁴ [**MASS-uh**]. Ye shall diligently keep the commandments of the LORD your God, and his testimonies, and his statutes, which he hath commanded thee. And thou shalt do that which is right and good in the sight of the LORD: that it may be well with thee, and that thou mayest go in and possess the good land which the LORD sware unto thy fathers. To cast out all thine enemies from before thee, as the LORD hath spoken. And when thy son asketh thee in time to come, saying, What mean the testimonies, and the statutes, and the judgments, which the LORD our God hath commanded you? Then thou shalt say unto thy son, We were Pharaoh’s [**FAY-rose**] bondmen in Egypt; and the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand: And the LORD shewed [**SHOWD**] signs and wonders, great and sore, upon Egypt, upon Pharaoh [**FAY-row**], and upon all his household, before our eyes: And he brought us out from thence, that he might bring us in, to give us the land which he sware unto our fathers. And the LORD commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the LORD our God, for our good always, that he might preserve us alive, as it is at this day. And it shall be our righteousness, if we observe to do all these commandments before the LORD our God, as he hath commanded us.”

Or,

Here beginneth the sixty-second Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.⁵

“For Zion’s sake will I not hold my peace, and for Jerusalem’s sake I will not rest, until the righteousness thereof go forth as brightness, and the salvation thereof as a lamp that burneth. And the Gentiles shall see thy righteousness, and all kings thy glory: and thou shalt be called by a new name, which the

¹ This sermon was originally written for Holy Communion on Rogation Sunday, 2012.

² *An Alternative Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised in 1928)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER, WITH THE ADDITIONS AND DEVIATIONS PROPOSED IN 1928 37 (Canterbury Press 2008); *The Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised In 1928)*, A BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxx (South Africa 1954); *A Table of Lessons (authorized by the Episcopal Synod)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxix (CIPBC 1963).

³ Deuteronomy 6:1-end (KJV).

⁴ Hebrew, “test” or “temptation”. See Exodus 17:1-7.

⁵ Isaiah 62:1-end (KJV).

⁶ Hebrew, “My delight is in her”.

⁷ Hebrew, “She who is married”, a symbolic name for the heavenly Jerusalem.

⁸ St. Luke 20:27—21:4 (KJV).

⁹ St. John 12:24 (RSV).

¹⁰ I Corinthians 15:36-37, 40, 42-46 (RSV).

¹¹ (1921-1983), sometime Dean of St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Seminary and a leading 20th-Century Russian Orthodox theologian.

¹² *The Order for the Administration of the Lord’s Supper or Holy Communion*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER 82-83 (Anglican Church of Canada, 1962).

¹³ Bishop Ordinary, the Diocese of the Holy Cross; Rector, the Cathedral Church of the Epiphany, Columbia, SC.

Ascension. These realities are explosive in power, majesty and beauty, in our midst, as though the place in which we are gathered is shaken and we are all filled with the Holy Ghost and speak the Word of God with boldness.

The roof can be lifted off its rafters at any moment. Vincent Van Gogh created in his paintings a sense of this vibrancy running through creation-in-the-presence-of- God. His figures vibrate and pulsate. The mountains clap their hands. Oceans leap like a deer. The morning star sings together with men. The whole cosmos is dizzy with joy. Christ is risen and life is given! Jesus made the ultimate tragedy the means of ultimate victory. Death, our planting in the ground, is in Christ the most fruitful condition of all, the passage to life.

So our Lord must never be for us an optional added extra. He is Lord of all! He is our very life! In Him we have boldness of approach to the Father, and boldness of testimony and boldness to bring others to His love. He is Lord of all! So our message is not a philosophical speculation, nor is it a tentative suggestion, nor are we here to make a modest contribution to religious thought.

Christ is the very life of man! He is our very life! “Ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full, with all the overflowing, exuberant fullness that David prophesied in Psalm 65, with clouds that drop fatness, of little hills rejoicing on every side, of folds full of sheep, of valleys so thick with corn that they laugh and sing. Ask, that your joy may be full, that Christ, dwelling in your hearts by faith, ye may be filled with all the fullness of God.

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The Rt. Rev'd Paul C. Hewett, SSC¹³
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mouth of the LORD shall name. Thou shalt also be a crown of glory in the hand of the LORD, and a royal diadem in the hand of thy God. Thou shalt no more be termed Forsaken; neither shall thy land any more be termed Desolate: but thou shalt be called Hephzibah⁶ [**HEFF-zih-buh**], and thy land Beulah⁷ [**BY-OU-luh**]: for the LORD delighteth in thee, and thy land shall be married.

“For as a young man marrieth a virgin, so shall thy sons marry thee: and as the bridegroom rejoiceth over the bride, so shall thy God rejoice over thee. I have set watchmen upon thy walls, O Jerusalem, which shall never hold their peace day nor night: ye that make mention of the LORD, keep not silence, And give him no rest, till he establish, and till he make Jerusalem a praise in the earth. The LORD hath sworn by his right hand, and by the arm of his strength, Surely I will no more give thy corn to be meat for thine enemies; and the sons of the stranger shall not drink thy wine, for the which thou hast laboured: But they that have gathered it shall eat it, and praise the LORD; and they that have brought it together shall drink it in the courts of my holiness.

“Go through, go through the gates; prepare ye the way of the people; cast up, cast up the highway; gather out the stones; lift up a standard for the people. Behold, the LORD hath proclaimed unto the end of the world, Say ye to the daughter of Zion, Behold, thy salvation cometh; behold, his reward is with him, and his work before him. And they shall call them, The holy people, The redeemed of the LORD: and thou shalt be called, Sought out, A city not forsaken.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the twenty-seventh Verse of the twentieth Chapter of the Gospel according to St. Luke.⁸

“Then came to him certain of the Sadducees, which deny that there is any resurrection; and they asked him, Saying, Master, Moses wrote unto us, If any man’s brother die, having a

wife, and he die without children, that his brother should take his wife, and raise up seed unto his brother. There were therefore seven brethren: and the first took a wife, and died without children. And the second took her to wife, and he died childless. And the third took her; and in like manner the seven also: and they left no children, and died. Last of all the woman died also. Therefore in the resurrection whose wife of them is she? for seven had her to wife. And Jesus answering said unto them, The children of this world marry, and are given in marriage: But they which shall be accounted worthy to obtain that world, and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry, nor are given in marriage: Neither can they die any more: for they are equal unto the angels; and are the children of God, being the children of the resurrection. Now that the dead are raised, even Moses shewed **[SHOWD]** at the bush, when he calleth the Lord the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. For he is not a God of the dead, but of the living: for all live unto him.

“Then certain of the scribes answering said, Master, thou hast well said. And after that they durst not ask him any question at all. And he said unto them, How say they that Christ is David’s son? And David himself saith **SETH]** in the book of Psalms, The LORD said unto my Lord, Sit thou on my right hand, Till I make thine enemies thy footstool. David therefore calleth him Lord, how is he then his son?

“Then in the audience of all the people he said unto his disciples, Beware of the scribes, which desire to walk in long robes, and love greetings in the markets, and the highest seats in the synagogues, and the chief rooms at feasts; Which devour widows’ houses, and for a shew **[SHOW]** make long prayers: the same shall receive greater damnation.

“And he looked up, and saw the rich men casting their gifts into the treasury. And he saw also a certain poor widow casting in thither two mites. And he said, Of a truth I say unto you, that this poor widow hath cast in more than they all: For all these have of their abundance cast in unto the offerings of God: but she of her penury hath cast in all the living that she had.”

Be it known by the sworn testimony of an eyewitness, that life in Christ is for real! It’s all true. No wonder we must have bells to ring. It’s all true. This Bible, our Creed, the Liturgy, it’s all true! The Word really was made flesh! Emmanuel, God with us! He really did rise from the dead! Jesus really did overcome sin and death! Man did not lose his last chance. God’s final effort to save us did not fail. Jesus is victorious. He takes the worst darkness of our lives and uses even that as the way to the dawn.

We really are saved! The Holy Spirit does really descend! He does give us new birth in Baptism. He engrafts the Word into our hearts. He really does help us grow and bear fruit. In Him, Jesus is really present in Holy Communion under the forms of bread and wine. We are being prepared right now for a destiny in love beyond anything we can imagine. And we have all this in God’s Family, our holy Mother, the Church. It’s all true! Let the bells ring! Let the earth bless the Lord; praise Him and magnify Him forever!

Christ is risen! “And the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures,” we say in the Nicene Creed. The Creed cries out to be sung. Saying it hardly does it justice. He rose again. I have overcome! If the grain of wheat dies, it bears much fruit! All this should be sung, proclaimed!

This is a triumphal proclamation, a love song, in response to God’s love song, the love song of Christ and the Church, “I have overcome the world.” Fr. Alexander Schmemmann¹¹ used to say, “How can we contain the meaning of Easter? It is the most enormous fact in our lives as Christians. If we really receive its message, we are shattered by its meaning.”

In the Canon of the Mass, the unchanging, fixed great prayer of thanksgiving and consecration, on page 81¹² at the top, we proclaim Jesus’ mighty Resurrection, and His glorious

We shall be raised, just as He was, after we are sown in death. After we are sown, planted, like a big seed, into the ground, we will be harvested, and clothed with our resurrection bodies. We will celebrate this harvest of saints on November 1, on All Saints' Day. Our parents gave us mortal bodies at the beginning; God will give us immortal bodies at the end. Living in heaven with our resurrection bodies is going to be exciting. The Christian can look forward to heaven with excitement.

The devil's biggest hold over us is the fear of death. He wants us to be afraid of sickness, of getting old. He wants us to fear the unknown aspect of death. He wants us to pretend that death isn't really going to come to us. Jesus' Resurrection breaks the devil's hold over us. We know what death is because we have looked at Jesus. He was planted—we shall be planted. He came up again—we shall sprout forth again. There's nothing to worry about. We were born again in Baptism to a living hope through the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance which is imperishable. We were born again to a shatter-proof life.

The baptismal life in which this begins is a direct turning to face the most profound moment of truth in your life, the truth about yourself and the Truth who is Christ. He sends the Holy Spirit, the seed of God, who forms Christ in us, and brings us into the love of the Father. Now we can bring others to the love of God, and steer clear of the illusions that lead to nothingness.

The Christian faith works. There is the story, told in thousands of versions through the ages, of a woman taking care of an invalid daughter, for years and years, taking care, patiently, lovingly. One day her brother comes for a visit. He is once again a Christian after years of disillusionment with the Mormons. Observing the long years of loving care and sacrifice, and the slow improvement and blossoming of both the mother and the daughter, he says, "You know, the Christian faith really works." That's because it is really true.

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the twelfth chapter of the Gospel according to St. John: "[U]nless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit."⁹ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Homily:

Everyone is grateful for the rebirth of nature in the Spring. We may exclaim, "God, I like your style." This is the time of planting. The seed is sown, and the Church asks God to bless the lands and multiply the harvests of the world. We pray and work for a rich harvest of our crops, herds, flocks, fish, mines, oil wells, businesses, industries and finances.

We ask God to fill us with good things, so that they will spill over to the poor and needy, so that they too can give thanks. The word "rogation" in Rogation Sunday has to do with asking, as in the word, "interrogation." "Ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full," that our land may be fruitful.

The Old Testament was first in ecology, of understanding that everything belongs to God, and that man is the steward of creation. But too often today, ecology is a science looking for a spirituality. Will that spirituality be gnostic [NOSS-tick] and new age? Or will it be Christian?

The pseudo-science of the new age people debunks and enslaves man, it prioritizes spotted owls over men. It refuses to accept man's headship over creation, and it calls the earth our mother. The earth is not our mother. It is our sister. Mary is our Mother, and the earth is our sister.

Rogation has its roots in the Jewish Festival of Weeks, or first-fruits, to commemorate the giving of the Law on Mt. Sinai, seven weeks, or fifty days, after Passover in Egypt. Pentecost for the Jews is fifty days after Passover, the day when God gives the Law, just as for us Pentecost is fifty days after our Passover. Our Pentecost is the day when the Father sends the Holy Spirit, in Jesus' Name.

The Law is fulfilled in the Spirit. In the Jewish Festival of Weeks, the first-fruits of the barley harvest were offered to God. Now the term "first-fruits" implies latter-fruits, the big harvest to be gathered in the Autumn. The corollary to Rogation Day is Thanksgiving Day in November. The corollary to our asking for the Holy Spirit now, just before Pentecost, is All Saints' Day in November, the harvest of saints raised up by the Holy Spirit.

God wants us to be fruitful. He told Adam and Eve to till the soil and be the stewards of creation, and be fruitful and multiply. Not everyone today is called to till the soil. Not everyone is called to have children, although most are, and the short-shrift that children get today, both the born and the unborn, is lamentable. It is grievous to God, whose divine Providence gives the lie to myth-making about overpopulation.

Everyone is called to bear the fruit of good works. In Baptism, the seed of the Word is planted in our hearts by the Holy Ghost. In Holy Communion, and in our prayer and study of the Bible, the seed of Christ's life in us is nourished and strengthened.

Our vocation is the same as Mary's: to receive the Holy Spirit and to conceive and bear Christ in our lives, as someone once said, "to offer Christ another dwelling place among men, a bridgehead from which He can establish Himself and from which He can reach out to others, a tabernacle in which He may be enshrined."

Men have the same vocation as St. Joseph in relation to Mary, to make sure that she is protected and provided for, and to be her priest, the one who offers the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving for her. For men and women both, Christ-in-us, by the Holy Ghost, brings forth the fruit of good works and love. All our goodness, all our fruitfulness, all our prayer, comes from our Lord, dwelling in our minds and hearts.

One of the most amazing paradoxes of the New Testament is that the most fruitful condition of all is death: "[U]nless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." Compare this thought with St. Paul's words to the Corinthians:

"You foolish man! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And what you sow is not the body which is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain.... There are celestial bodies and there are terrestrial bodies; but the glory of the celestial is one, and the glory of the terrestrial is another.... So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body. Thus it is written, 'The first man Adam became a living being'; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual which is first but the physical, and then the spiritual."¹⁰

By His Resurrection, Jesus made death, the ultimate tragedy of tragedies, into the means of ultimate victory. Jesus was sown in death and raised in life. He is the firstfruits of them that sleep in death. We are the latter fruits.