

**Sermon for Morning Prayer:
The First Sunday in Lent**

The Reverend Warren E. Shaw, Priest in Charge

The Lessons:¹

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the second Chapter of the Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach, or Ecclesiasticus.²

“My son, if thou come to serve the Lord, prepare thy soul for temptation. Set thy heart aright, and constantly endure, and make not haste in time of trouble. Cleave unto him, and depart not away, that thou mayest be increased at thy last end. Whatsoever is brought upon thee take cheerfully, and be patient when thou art changed to a low estate. For gold is tried in the fire, and acceptable men in the furnace of adversity. Believe in him, and he will help thee; order thy way aright, and trust in him. Ye that fear the Lord, wait for his mercy; and go not aside, lest ye fall. Ye that fear the Lord, believe him; and your reward shall not fail. Ye that fear the Lord, hope for good, and for everlasting joy and mercy. Look at the generations of old, and see; did ever any trust in the Lord, and was confounded? or did any abide in his fear, and was forsaken? or whom did he ever despise, that called upon him? For the Lord is full of compassion and mercy, longsuffering, and very pitiful, and forgiveth sins, and saveth in time of affliction. Woe be to fearful hearts, and faint hands, and the sinner that goeth two ways! Woe unto him that is fainthearted! for he believeth not; therefore shall he not be defended. Woe unto you that have lost patience! and what will ye do when the Lord shall visit you? They that fear the Lord will not disobey his Word; and they that love him will keep his ways. They that fear the Lord will seek that which is well, pleasing unto him; and they that love him shall be filled with the law. They that fear the Lord will prepare their hearts, and humble their souls in his sight, Saying, We will fall into the hands of the Lord, and not into the hands of men: for as his majesty is, so is his mercy.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the fourteenth Verse of the seventh Chapter of the Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Romans.³

“For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin. For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I. If then I do that which I would not, I consent unto the law that it is good. Now then it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not. For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do. Now if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me. For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members.”⁴ In the Name of the Father, and of the ☧ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Homily:

St. Paul is here laying bare his soul. He is also expressing the experience of us all when we are honest with ourselves. No matter how hard we try we simply cannot control certain forces

¹ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xvi (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

² *Ecclesiasticus* 2:1-18 (KJV).

³ Romans 7: 14-25 (KJV).

⁴ Romans 7:22-24 (RSV).

that are at work in us. We like to think that we are free and in control of our lives, but that pleasant self deception belies our experience.

I sometimes get angry with myself when I do something wrong, as if, being the wise and powerful person that I am, I should have known better and should have done better. But the fact is that there are powerful forces at work in my life, and in everyone's life, that our minds and our wills cannot control. Some of those forces are external. They are part of our environment. Television is an example. If it did not influence our behavior nobody would advertise on it.

Peer pressure is another example. The values and opinions instilled by our parents and teachers during our formative years remain with us. Defense lawyers love to point out the influence of poverty or a broken home or inadequate education as excuses for criminal behavior.

All of these external forces can be resisted and can be overcome to a certain extent, but they are not the real problem. The real problem is that the enemy is within. "I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members."

Jesus says, "There is nothing outside a man which by going into him can defile him; but the things which come out of a man are what defile him." He is not talking about eating. Well, actually He is, but He is using the occasion to locate the seat of the human problem within the nature of man himself. We are fallen creatures, defective and in need of reconstructive spiritual surgery.

Alcoholics Anonymous has a twelve-step program for overcoming addiction. The first step is the hardest. The person must admit that he cannot control his drinking. He has to stop lying to himself by saying things like: "I can stop anytime I want." "I can handle it." "I can still do my work." But alcoholics are not the only ones who live in a state of denial. We all like to think that

we have more control over our lives and behaviors than we really have.

So often, when someone has died, I hear a friend or a relative say: “If only I had been there” or “If I had recognized what was happening”; “I wish I had not gone out that night”. It is so painful to confront the reality of our own impotence in the face of death that we lie to ourselves about how we could have prevented it and then feel guilty because we didn’t do it.

We do the same thing with what we call “original sin”, that “other law” that makes us unable to do what we know is right. We deceive ourselves into thinking that if only we would try a little harder we could live as righteous men and women. It is painful to admit that no amount of effort, no exertion of personal strength, no amount of will power, can win that inner war with what the Apostle calls “this body of death”.

But painful or not, we have to face the reality of our situation. We are addicted to our own desires and driven by our natural passions, which are in conflict with the law of God. “Wretched man that I am,” cries St. Paul. “Who will deliver me from this body of death?” And then – and then – he embraces the answer: “Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Notice what has happened. St. Paul has realized that the struggle with evil is a war within himself. Then he perceives that he can neither think his way or will his way to victory in that struggle. But before he can embrace the Gospel and give thanks for his deliverance he must first embrace the pain of accepting his own inability to overcome his evil inclinations. He cries out for a savior, and he knows who that Savior is.

Jesus says in St. Matthew’s Gospel, “Come unto me, all ye that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you.” The priest reads those words at every Eucharist after the confession and absolution.

Who are those who travail and are heavy laden? Is it not those who vainly struggle to overcome sin by their own efforts? And what is the refreshment that Jesus brings? Is it not to lift the burden of sin from our shoulders and give us new strength to pursue holiness?

Recovering alcoholics like to talk about turning things over to a higher power. What they mean is that they recognize that certain things are beyond their control. If something is in the past, it is beyond their control. If a pending decision is to be made by someone else, that too is something they cannot control. Whatever is beyond their control, including their addiction, they let go of and allow their higher power to deal with it. Then they turn to what they can control: the company they keep, the places they go, the things they read and listen to. And they forgive people who have done them wrong and seek out people whom they have wronged and attempt to make things right.

Jesus invites all of us to do that. He sets us free to do that. He is our higher power. He is our Savior.

The reading of St. Paul’s letter to the Romans is what set Martin Luther free from the oppression of his conscience. It set John Wesley free from his fear of Hell. It can set you free as well if you are willing to recognize yourself in what the Apostle says of himself in this ancient letter.

“I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

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