

Gesima 3 - Quinquagesima

Morning Prayer A

First Lesson Wisdom 7:7-14

Second Lesson John 15:1-17

Homily

From our Old Testament Lesson,
the Wisdom of Solomon:

*"[Wisdom] is a treasure unto men
that never faileth:
which they that use become the friends of God,
being commended f
or the gifts that come from learning. "*

From our New Testament Lesson,
the words of Our Lord Jesus:

*"Ye are my friends,
if ye do whatsoever I command you. "*

You may remember
that the young man Solomon was asked by God
what it was that he wanted above all things.
Solomon's prayer was for wisdom.
In today's reading
we hear him proclaiming its value,
above the might and prestige of the throne,

greater than all the riches of the world,
more valuable than the finest jewels,
finer even than health and beauty.

Solomon asked for wisdom.

He received wisdom.

He was known as the wisest man of his time,
perhaps of any time.

He received wisdom
and never regretted his choice.

By wisdom he became a great king, and a just one,
renowned for that wisdom until this day.

*They that use it become the friends of God,
said Solomon.*

Wisdom is not merely something one has,
A wise man must act wisely
if he is to benefit from his wisdom.

The book we call Ecclesiastes
is either the words of Solomon himself
or a preacher's expression
of what the king must have thought.
By wisdom the king built a strong kingdom.
By wisdom he became legendary for his wealth.
By wisdom he had every opportunity that could be
had,
and what did he say about it all?
Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.

He had much.
 But he was bored,
 bored and unhappy,
 and unable to leave a united kingdom when he died.
 He had wisdom,
 but he made unwise choices,
 his desires for political power and beautiful women
 outweighed his wisdom.
 He had too many wives.
 He allowed the worship of too many gods.,
 he seemed to have it all,
 but Ecclesiastes tells us that he knew he'd failed.

They that use it." said Solomon,
"become the friends of God,

"Ye are my friends," said Christ,
"if ye do whatsoever I command you. "

What is wisdom?
 Is it possession of a high-powered human mind?
 Is it the ability to solve all problems
 -- to understand all mysteries --
 by thinking hard enough?
 That's what Adam and eve thought
 as they began to eat the fruit
 of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

That, however, was foolish.
 They were wiser before,
 when they could admit that they didn't know it all.

What is wisdom?
 Fundamentally it's recognition
 that I don't have all the answers, and can't;
 recognition that only God is truly wise.
 It's learning to think God's way.

It's willingness to accept what He has to say.
 It's willing obedience to His direction.

We've all heard people assert that they don't like a
 God
 who just HAS to have His own way --
 but it's not like that.
 He has indeed given us free will.
 Indeed we can do as we like,
 but there are consequences.
 The foolishness of defying God's will
 puts us at odds with the only way things work.
 He wants us to get it right, because He loves us.
 Wisdom is coming to God on His terms,
 learning from Him what it takes
 to live with Him as a friend through countless ages.

Lent begins Wednesday.

Can we devote this season to learning His wisdom?
to identifying our own foolishness?
to setting our lives straight according to His will?

Through the ages His mighty voice rings out:
"I love you --
and I call you to be My friend."

Let us pray

Direct us, O Lord, in all our doings, with thy most
gracious favour, and further us with thy continual
help; that in all our works begun, continued, and
ended in thee, we may glorify thy holy Name, and
finally, by thy mercy, obtain everlasting life; through
Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Gesima 3 - Quinquagesima

Morning Prayer B

First Lesson Deut 10:12-15, [16,] 17-22, 11:1

Second Lesson 1 John 2:1-17

Homily

*My little children, these things write I unto you,
that ye sin not.*

And if any man sin,

we have an advocate with the Father,

Jesus Christ the righteous:

And he is the propitiation for our sins:

and not for ours only,

but also for the sins of the whole world.

So began our New Testament Lesson this morning, the same words are heard so very often in the traditional Prayer Book Eucharist, the conclusion of the "Comfortable words", words that so very nicely hold a capsule version of the Gospel of salvation.

If we have sinned, we have an Advocate.

We are not left to solve the problem all by ourselves, and that is a good thing, because we can't.

He came, He paid the price, He forgives.

We are forgiven, the children of God.

We can boldly call Him, "Our Father,"
we can boldly come to His Altar for heavenly food.
What a glorious and, yes, comforting truth!

But have you noticed the words at the opening of this lesson, that are not part of that service?

St. John says, "I write this, *that ye sin not.*"

It is not enough to know that we are forgiven.

We need to know

what God expects of us from here on in.

How often do we try to excuse ourselves,

saying, perhaps that it's only a little sin,

or that God surely knows that we're only human,

"Hey, I'm not a saint, you know."

Perhaps we have in our minds

that this one sin is OK,

all we have to do is to remember to repent later,

perhaps even to go to our priest for absolution.

Yes, John did say that IF we sin,

we have an advocate,

but he did not say that we therefore

have permission to sin.

His words: "...that ye sin not ..."

If we take sin so lightly, St. John's very next words should be chilling in the extreme:

*"And hereby we do know that we know him,
if we keep his commandments*

*He that saith, I know him,
and keepeth not his commandments,
is a liar, and the truth is not in him."*
That puts us between a rock and a hard place,
doesn't it?

We're not saints, just yet, that's obvious,
but that's no excuse either.
We are called to be saints.
If we are not perfect, that's not good,
not in the least.

That is exactly what needs to change.
That ye sin not,
that is the goal,
that is what we need always to aim for.
We have to be better than we are right now..
but if any man sin,
there is a remedy.
We are called to come to Jesus, our Advocate,
to accept forgiveness at His hands,
to let Him pick us up out of the dirt,
and to reach out once again for holiness,
to grow up in Him to be saints.

Our Old Testament Lesson began
with words from Moses:
And now, Israel,
what doth the LORD thy God require of thee,

*but to fear the LORD thy God,
to walk in all his ways, and to love him,
and to serve the LORD thy God
with all thy heart and with all thy soul,*

God hasn't ever changed His mind.
That is just what he has wanted of mankind
from the very beginning until this very day.
And yet we sin.
We have been in rebellion from the very beginning,
and that is still true of us.
That's why we need a Saviour.
And, because of God's love,
that's why we have one.

And that is why we begin Lent this Wednesday,
not because we need to grovel
(though perhaps we do),
not so we can meditate on what horrible people we
are
(though there is truth in that thought)
not because there is no hope for us
(that would be a satanic lie),
but because we have an Advocate.
Every year we spend forty days
remembering our sins,
identifying them,
bringing them forward into plain view,

asking God to make us truly sorry for them,
 asking Him to guide us to do better,
 and asking Him for forgiveness,

Both of the readings highlight a requirement of God,
 against which we often rebel,
 against which we are constantly offending,
 offending in ways we often do not notice,
 mistaking our truly grievous sin for righteousness.

The command is, "Love,"
 love of the brethren,
 love of the needy,
 love of the stranger,
 and as Our Lord commanded elsewhere,
 love of our very enemies.

Yes, we need to use wisdom,
 and evil does need to be dealt with,
 and sometimes the way to do that
 is not all that easy to figure out,
 but one thing is clear.
 If our anger keeps us from loving, we sin.
 Do we love those we call heretics?
 We are called to do so.
 Do we love criminals? Homosexuals?

Illegal aliens? Terrorists?
 We are called to do so.

Even if we must deal with them harshly,
 we are not allowed to let up on loving them,
 as God loved us.

His call to them is the same call we have heard.
 His love for them is the same love we have known.

Can we learn this Lent to show in our lives,
 to know in our hearts,
 the depth of His love?

Let us pray.

O God, forasmuch as without thee we are not able to
 please thee; Mercifully grant that thy Holy Spirit
 may in all things direct and rule our hearts; through
 Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Gesima 3 - Quinquagesima

Evening Prayer A

First Lesson Lev 19:1-2, 9-18

Second Lesson 1 John 4

Homily

Lent starts Wednesday..

This is a good time of year.

A little difficult, as it should be, but good.

It's a time when we practice spiritual disciplines:

more fasting, more praying,

more watchfulness toward sin,

more sorrow at what we have done.

We heard the words of the Lord,

spoken through Moses:

"Ye shall be holy:

for I the LORD your God am holy."

That is the theme for Lent: holiness.

What does it mean to be holy?

The Pharisees thought they knew.

They had developed a list of rules, mostly "don'ts",

either right out of the Bible,

or intended to make it easier to obey the Bible.

They kept these and did the religious rituals,
and that made them OK.

Jesus didn't think so.

Christians still do the same kind of things.

I go to church, I do some fasting,

I say my prayers,

I keep away from what I'm supposed to avoid.

As some of our Fundamentalist brethren
are wont to say:

I don't drink, I don't smoke, I don't chaw,
and I don't fool around.

Don't laugh too loud.

We're usually not much better.

If we've done a pretty good job
of keeping the rules,

we tend to think we're all right.

But Jesus still doesn't think so.

Lent is a time for us to think about why,
and what to do about it.

Now, keeping up with our religious duties,
with attending church,

with the proper observance of God-given rites,
with the rightful reception of sacraments,

with our life of prayer,

all these are of obvious importance,
absolutely indispensable;
but they are not the whole of the matter,
far from it.

Notice that we have two lessons appointed today,
both about holiness,
and neither so much as mentioning
these religious duties.

In Deuteronomy we hear a list of specifics,
all of which concern respect and concern for others.
In reaping and gleaning, there's a very clear thought:
What is yours is indeed yours, but ...
you are not entitled
to claim every last bit for yourself.
Leave some for those that need it.
In other words share. That is part of holiness.
Don't steal, don't defraud, don't lie,
above all don't use false oaths to do so.
Respect the blind and deaf,
and by implication others living under handicaps,
be honest and impartial,
don't gossip, and so forth.
The passage ends
with the summation quoted by Jesus
that we hear in the Mass:
thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself:
I am the LORD.

St. John in essence covers the same ground,
but a bit more theologically.

*"Hereby know ye the Spirit of God:
Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ
is come in the flesh is of God: "*

Well, here is a simple matter
of getting the Creed right,
or is it?

What do we confess when we believe
that He is come in the flesh?

*"In this was manifested the love of God toward us,
because that God sent his only begotten Son
into the world,
that we might live through him. "*

We confess a life lived among sinful humanity,
out of love,
out of a desire for nothing but the ultimate good
for every man, woman, and child
that will accept Him.
He became man, not for his own benefit,
not out of his own desire,
but for us.

*"Herein is love,
not that we loved God, but that he loved us,
and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. "*

All our religious duties, important though they are,
become worthless if they are done to get credit.
In First Corinthians, in the Epistle of today's Mass,
St. Paul gives a long list
of unquestionably good things, and says
that without "charity" that is,
without the deepest kind of love,
it's all worthless,
like the fading sound of a clanging gong.

*"Beloved, if God so loved us,
we ought also to love one another. "*

Here's the point:
If we believe that He came in the flesh,
we need to be showing that faith
in the way we live,
just as He did.

*:"We love him, because he first loved us.
If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother,
he is a liar:*

for he that loveth not his brother

*whom he hath seen,
how can he love God whom he hath not seen? "*

This Lent, as we examine our consciences,
let's not be content to check off
the list of commandments,
let's not be satisfied with going to church more,
let's not consider giving something up
to be enough;
let's ask Our Lord
to show us how
to walk in this world,
full of the same love
that He has shown toward us.

Let us pray once again, in today's collect:

O Lord, who has taught us that all our doings
withjout charity are nothing worth; Send thy Holy
Ghost, and pour into our hearts that most excellent
gift of charity, the very bond of peace and of all
virtues, without which whosoever liveth is counted
dead before thee. Grant this for thine only Son Jesus
Christ's sake. Amen.

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Evening Prayer B

First Lesson Isa 51:1-8

Second Lesson Mark 9:14-32

Homily

*"This kind can come forth by nothing,
but by prayer and fasting. "*

This verse, in its full form,
as found in the old versions of the Bible,
rather than in the shorter version
(without mention of fasting)
used by most modern translations,
is the key to today's reading from St. Mark,
and what makes it appropriate
just before we enter into the great fast of Lent.

Our Lord had sent his disciples out
to preach the Gospel.
He had entrusted them
with supernatural power to heal,
and to cast out demons,
and, as they ministered in His Name,
they certainly did witness miracles at their hands,

and were amazed.

But then they came upon a boy they couldn't help.
The lad was clearly in trouble.

He often had what we would call seizures,
spectacular ones,
falling down, sometimes into the fire or the water,
writhing and foaming.

Their diagnosis was possession by a dumb spirit.
Would we have diagnosed it differently?
Very likely we would have called it epilepsy
or something similar.

Which is right?

Actually, it doesn't matter.

The boy was suffering and in danger of death.
It had been that way all his life,
and his family was enduring the fear
and the hard work
that his condition caused.

The disciples had been authorized to help,
and they tried, oh, how they tried!
And nothing changed.

And they came to Jesus confused and complaining.
"You said, but we couldn't -- Why?"

Jesus asked the father if he believed he could do it.
Do you think the disciples had forgotten to ask that?
They most likely had asked,
and the father's answer

was probably a lot more confident then than now.
 Now, he'd been seriously disappointed,
 but still wanted to believe.
 "Lord, I believe,
 help my unbelief."

With this weak profession of faith, Our Lord
 commanded that spirit to leave,
 and it did.

When they asked again,
 "Why couldn't we?"
 He could have said,
 "Well, this one was too much for you."
 That wasn't His answer.
 He had given them that power and authority.
 What he said was this:

*"This kind can come forth by nothing,
 but by prayer and fasting. "*

Had they prayed for the boy?
 You bet they had!
 It took more than prayer.
 It took fasting.
 Why?

Well, we can pray anywhere, any time, can't we?
 Many irreligious people in sudden danger

have found out that, yes, they can pray,
 even all of a sudden.
 But fasting takes time.
 You're not really fasting until you feel hungry,
 until you've been at it awhile,
 until it has become a part of your life,
 a constant part of your awareness.
 When fasting is part of prayer,
 it's not just words, but your life is on the line.
 If you've been fasting,
 your prayer has something in it
 that doesn't come to be suddenly.
 It's been cooking and growing in you.
 Your heart has been conditioned to seek God
 in a way you would not normally do.

The editors of our lectionary were wise indeed
 to continue this reading
 just a couple of verses beyond this story itself,
 like this:

*"And they departed thence,
 and passed through Galilee;
 and he would not that any man should know it.*

*For he taught his disciples, and said unto them,
 The Son of man is delivered into the hands of men,
 and they shall kill him;*

*and after that he is killed,
he shall rise the third day.
But they understood not that saying,
and were afraid to ask him."*

This sounds like a change of subject,
but it isn't.

Jesus may not
have been obviously fasting from food.
He said that John came fasting,
but that He came eating and drinking,
but still His life was one of intense fasting.
Every minute He knew why He was here,
and that his very body belonged to others.
His flesh was given for the life of the world,
and there is no greater fast.

This Lent, as we do our paltry little fast,
may that make us mindful of His call
that we take up our Cross and follow Him.
We may not see actual miracles in our path,
but, then again we may,
and, walking, as we do,
in the valley of the shadow of death,
we will know, with Isaiah, that

*"...the LORD shall comfort Zion:
he will comfort all her waste places;*

*and he will make her wilderness like Eden,
and her desert like the garden of the LORD;
joy and gladness shall be found therein,
thanksgiving, and the voice of melody."*

May He bless and direct our fasting.
Amen.