

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER
The Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary¹
(February 2)²

Lessons:³

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the twenty-first Verse of the first Chapter of the First Book of Samuel, otherwise called the First Book of the Kings.⁴

“... And the man Elkanah [ell-KAY-nuh], and all his house, went up to offer unto the LORD the yearly sacrifice, and his vow. But Hannah went not up; for she said unto her husband, I will not go up until the child be weaned, and then I will bring him, that he may appear before the LORD, and there abide for ever. And Elkanah [ell-KAY-nuh] her husband said unto her, Do what seemeth thee good; tarry until thou have weaned him; only the LORD establish his word. So the woman abode, and gave her son suck until she weaned him.

“And when she had weaned him, she took him up with her, with three bullocks, and one ephah [EE-fuh] of flour, and a bottle of wine, and brought him unto the house of the LORD in Shiloh: and the child was young. And they slew a bullock, and brought the child to Eli. And she said, Oh my lord, as thy soul liveth, my lord, I am the woman that stood by thee here, praying unto the LORD. For this child I prayed; and the LORD hath given me my petition which I asked of him: Therefore also I have lent him to the LORD; as long as he liveth he shall be lent to the LORD. And he worshipped the LORD there.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the fourteenth Verse of the eighth Chapter of the Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Romans.⁵

“... For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God. For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father. The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we

may be also glorified together. For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God. For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope, Because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “*For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.*”⁶
In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Homily:

In his weekly *Bulletin Inserts*, Fr. Laurence Wells⁷ has told us about the two possible ways to translate part of today’s Second Lesson:

“The eighteenth verse contains an interesting translation problem. Is it the ‘glory which shall be revealed in us’ (as our AV and Prayer Book have it) or ‘to us’ (as many modern translations render it)? It is attractive to think of the ‘glory’ mentioned here to be the wonderful moment when the returning Lord suddenly becomes visible in the skies as He returns to earth. The New Testament surely promises such an event of glory. But the larger context here, the futility of creation under the curse of thorns and thistles, the wrap-up of history with the redemption of our bodies in the General Resurrection, the believer’s special status as ‘first-fruits of the Spirit,’ compels us to think the old translation is correct. We ourselves will be part of that glorious event when Christ comes again and shares His glory with us.”

I agree with Fr. Wells. And in order to make sense of today's Second Lesson, we need to see that the glory to be revealed *in* us when Christ returns to raise us from the dead, will be the perfection of the life already implanted in us by grace. The grace of God has been at work in each of us from the moment of new birth, from the time of baptism.

Everything that the world, the flesh and the devil can throw at you, to overcome you and destroy you, has been thrown, is being thrown or will be thrown. Just as a person arrested by the police is warned, "anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law," you may be sure that anything the devil is allowed to throw at you can and will be thrown in the battlefield of your life. It is God who restrains evil so that you may withstand temptation, as St. Paul wrote:

*"There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it."*⁸

So what may be thrown at us is limited to what God Himself allows. This does not mean, as some have paraphrased, "God won't give you more than you can handle." It means, instead, that God watches over each one of us, so that *temptation to sin*, as thrown at us, cannot be completely overwhelming. The picture that should come to mind is from the first two chapters of Job, where the devil has to ask God's permission as to what he may do to God's servant.

The fact is, God *does indeed* give us more than we can handle; for the Law of God is weak through the flesh; that is, the Law of God cannot make us good; the commandments themselves cannot transform us. The Scriptures reveal quite emphatically that we, in our weakened condition as sinners, *cannot* fully and perfectly obey God's commandments. No one ever has, except for one Man, Jesus Christ. You and I cannot make ourselves righteous, good or acceptable in His sight. Neither can we keep ourselves alive.

The kind of sufferings that St. Paul speaks of in today's Second Lesson surely include the kind that only sincere believers may experience. One chapter earlier he

spoke of a special kind of suffering, that of the sincere believer who wants to be righteous:

“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.”⁹

This kind of suffering is of a nature that some individuals may never understand. It is, if we understand it, the grace of God at work. That may shock you to hear. Is not the grace of God always evident in happy feelings? Does not the grace of God make us “overcomers” and all that? Doesn’t the man with *real* faith look like a perpetual smiley button?

To that I say, show me the person who never feels the pain of his sin, who never feels sorrow from knowledge of his own failure to please God, and I will show you someone in whom the grace of God is not evident at all. Such a person, who can go through life without the pain of conviction, the sense of need for God’s forgiveness, a hunger and thirst for righteousness that eludes his own grasp, is in very grave danger. His heart is hardened, his conscience seared by a hot iron, his mind closed to the voice of the Holy Spirit urging repentance. (Repentance is not merely turning from this or that particular sin and failing; it is a radical turning *to* God, just as the Prodigal Son had to return to his father).

Such a person also is closed and indifferent to the needs of other people, and therefore is in danger of being one of the goats on the king’s left hand, to whom the Lord will say, in the Last day,

“Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels: For I was an hungred, and ye gave me no meat: I

was thirsty, and ye gave me no drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me not in: naked, and ye clothed me not: sick, and in prison, and ye visited me not.... Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye did it not to one of the least of these, ye did it not to me.”¹⁰

If you can hear the Summary of the Law, or the Ten Commandments, week after week, and not be moved to pray, “Lord have mercy upon us”—indeed, “upon me,” then you may go through life without “*the sufferings of this present time*” as Paul experienced them within himself. But if that seed is not planted within you, the grace of God that moves you to genuine repentance and to genuine love of neighbor as manifested in good works when opportunity arises, how can you hope to know the glory that will be revealed in the children of God? You may find yourself excluded from eternal joy.

Some people think it is a sin to feel any suffering. On the contrary, it is the worst condition of sin when the heart has become so hardened that it cannot suffer. That is, not suffer the reality of conviction and be moved to true repentance. St. Paul’s own knowledge of his helpless condition was answered by faith in God’s goodness as revealed and manifested already in Jesus Christ, giving Paul the absolute assurance of faith about eternity. And so he went on to say,

“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. There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh: That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.”¹¹

Walking after the Spirit is described in our Book of Common Prayer as “heartly repentance and true faith.” In modern English we would say “sincere repentance (or, from the heart) and true faith.”

We look for the grace of God in this life, that fruit of the Spirit that shows His working in each of us. Our true hope, however, is not in this life, for this life will end for each one of us. If all we wanted or needed was simply “to be better people,” as some perceive of a thing they call “religion,” or to be “all that we can be,” as the old U.S. Army advertisement put it, our lot would be one of utter futility. We would never be free from sin and death, even if we did become *all that we can be*.

Our hope is not in anything so fantastic or so shallow. This life will end in death. Even at its very lowest, the mortality rate is one hundred percent. Making sense of suffering, or pretending that there is no futility, or vanity as today’s Second Lesson puts it, is not the Christian hope. It is not the Gospel. Our hope is in Jesus Christ our Lord. He has reconciled us to God, so that the pain of conscience is relieved only by knowing that on his cross He bore away forever the guilt and stain of our sin, and that in rising again on the third day He conquered death for each of us.

The joy of the Christian, in this vain and temporary life, is not that we have no suffering. In fact we have, in addition to the sufferings common to mankind such as, from time to time, loss, sickness, economic troubles and pain, added to the certainty of death, the *added suffering* of a conscience that feels even the briefest separation, that we make by our own sin, from God’s fellowship. The joy of the Christian is that “*in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us.*”¹² The joy of the Christian is that our hope and faith depend not on ourselves, weak as we are through sin and death, but upon the Lord Jesus Christ who has come and who will come again in glory.

It is, as expressed in today’s Second Lesson: “*The sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.*” For, as the same chapter concludes:

“For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor

height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”



The Rev'd Robert Hart¹³
July 1, 2012

¹ This sermon was originally written on the Epistle for Holy Communion on the Fourth Sunday after Trinity, 2012.

² These readings are to be used when this Feast falls after Septuagesima Sunday. See *Psalms and Lessons for the Fixed Holy Days* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xliv (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943), fn. †. Prior to Septuagesima, the Second Lesson is Galatians 4:1-7, for which this sermon is not adapted.

³ *Psalms and Lessons for the Fixed Holy Days* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xliv (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

⁴ I Samuel 1:21-end (KJV).

⁵ Romans 8:14-21 (KJV).

⁶ Romans 8:18 (KJV).

⁷ Retired Rector, St. Michael and All Angels Anglican Catholic Church, Orange Park, FL.

⁸ I Corinthians 10:13 (KJV).

⁹ Romans 7:15-23 (KJV).

¹⁰ St. Matthew 25:31 ff (KJV).

¹¹ Romans 7:24-8:4 (KJV).

¹² Romans 8:37 (KJV).

¹³ Rector, St. Benedict's Anglican Catholic Church, Chapel Hill, NC.