

SERMON FOR EVENING PRAYER
The Twenty-Third Sunday after Trinity¹

Lessons:²

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the second Chapter of the Proverbs.³

“My son, if thou wilt receive my words, and hide my commandments with thee; So that thou incline thine ear unto wisdom, and apply thine heart to understanding; Yea, if thou criest after knowledge, and liftest up thy voice for understanding; If thou seekest her as silver, and searchest for her as for hid treasures; Then shalt thou understand the fear of the LORD, and find the knowledge of God. For the LORD giveth wisdom: out of his mouth cometh knowledge and understanding. He layeth up sound wisdom for the righteous: he is a buckler to them that walk uprightly. He keepeth the paths of judgment, and preserveth the way of his saints. Then shalt thou understand righteousness, and judgment, and equity; yea, every good path.

“When wisdom entereth into thine heart, and knowledge is pleasant unto thy soul; Discretion shall preserve thee, understanding shall keep thee: To deliver thee from the way of the evil man, from the man that speaketh froward things; Who leave the paths of uprightness, to walk in the ways of darkness; Who rejoyce to do evil, and delight in the frowardness of the wicked; Whose ways are crooked, and they froward in their paths: To deliver thee from the strange woman, even from the stranger which flattereth with her words; Which forsaketh the guide of her youth, and forgetteth the covenant of her God. For her house inclineth unto death, and her paths unto the dead. None that go unto her return again, neither take they hold of the paths of life. That thou mayest walk in the way of good men, and keep the paths of the righteous. For the upright shall dwell in the land, and the perfect shall remain in it. But the wicked shall be cut off from the earth, and the transgressors shall be rooted out of it.”

Or,

Here beginneth the third Chapter of the Proverbs.⁴

“My son, forget not my law; but let thine heart keep my commandments: For length of days, and long life, and peace, shall they add to thee. Let not mercy and truth forsake thee: bind them about thy neck; write them upon the table of thine heart: So shalt thou find favour and good understanding in the sight of God and man.

“Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.

“Be not wise in thine own eyes: fear the LORD, and depart from evil. It shall be health to thy navel, and marrow to thy bones. Honour the LORD with thy substance, and with the firstfruits of all thine increase: So shall thy barns be filled with plenty, and thy presses shall burst out with new wine.

“My son, despise not the chastening of the LORD; neither be weary of his correction: For whom the LORD loveth he correcteth; even as a father the son in whom he delighteth.

“Happy is the man that findeth wisdom, and the man that getteth understanding. For the merchandise of it is better than the merchandise of silver, and the gain thereof than fine gold. She is more precious than rubies: and all the things thou canst desire are not to be compared unto her. Length of days is in her right hand; and in her left hand riches and honour. Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to them that lay hold upon her: and happy is every one that retaineth her. The LORD by wisdom hath founded the earth; by understanding hath he established the heavens. By his knowledge the depths are broken up, and the clouds drop down the dew.

“My son, let not them depart from thine eyes: keep sound wisdom and discretion: So shall they be life unto thy soul, and grace to thy neck. Then shalt thou walk in thy way safely, and thy foot shall not stumble. When thou liest down, thou shalt not be afraid: yea, thou shalt lie down, and thy sleep

shall be sweet. Be not afraid of sudden fear, neither of the desolation of the wicked, when it cometh. For the LORD shall be thy confidence, and shall keep thy foot from being taken.”

Or,

Here beginneth the twenty-ninth Verse of the second Chapter of the First Book of the Maccabees.⁵

“... Then many that sought after justice and judgment went down into the wilderness to dwell there: Both they, and their cattle; because afflictions increased sore upon them. Now when it was told the king’s servants, and the host that was at Jerusalem, in the city of David, that certain men, who had broken the king’s commandment, were gone down into the secret places in the wilderness, They pursued after them a great number, and having overtaken them, they camped against them, and made war against them on the sabbath day. And they said unto them, Let that which ye have done hitherto suffice; come forth, and do according to the commandment of the king, and ye shall live. But they said, We will not come forth, neither will we do the king’s commandment, to profane the sabbath day. So then they gave them the battle with all speed. Howbeit they answered them not, neither cast they a stone at them, nor stopped the places where they lay hid; But said, Let us die all in our innocency: heaven and earth shall testify for us, that ye put us to death wrongfully. So they rose up against them in battle on the sabbath, and they slew them, with their wives and children, and their cattle, to the number of a thousand people. Now when Mattathias and his friends understood hereof, they mourned for them right sore. And one of them said to another, If we all do as our brethren have done, and fight not for our lives and laws against the heathen, they will now quickly root us out of the earth. At that time therefore they decreed, saying, Whosoever shall come to make battle with us on the sabbath day, we will fight against him; neither will we die all, as our brethren that were murdered in the secret places. Then came there unto him a company of Assideans, who were mighty men of Israel, even all

such as were voluntarily devoted unto the law. Also all they that fled for persecution joined themselves unto them, and were a stay unto them. So they joined their forces, and smote sinful men in their anger, and wicked men in their wrath: but the rest fled to the heathen for succour. Then Mattathias and his friends went round about, and pulled down the altars: And what children soever they found within the coast of Israel uncircumcised, those they circumcised valiantly. They pursued also after the proud men, and the work prospered in their hand. So they recovered the law out of the hand of the Gentiles, and out of the hand of kings, neither suffered they the sinner to triumph.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the thirteenth Chapter of the First Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians.⁶

“Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing. Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see

their illnesses?” The question that we must ask is: “What does it mean that Christ heals anyone ever at all?” Saint Anselm tells us that all of the benefits of Christ’s suffering and death have been given to us, for He had no need of anything for Himself. So, when I see Christ showing mercy to the blind man, I understand better what happens later in the story; I understand better what His cross has done for me.

In that we see love that is completely selfless and giving.

—oo0oo—

The Rev’d Robert Hart¹⁶
February 19, 2012

¹ This sermon was originally written on the Epistle at Mass on Quinquagesima 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 44 (Canterbury Press 2008); *The Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised In 1928)*, A BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xl (South Africa 1954); *A Table of Lessons (authorized by the Episcopal Synod)*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxxix (CIPBC 1963).

³ Proverbs 2:1-end (KJV).

⁴ Proverbs 3:1-26 (KJV).

⁵ I *Maccabees* 2:29-48 (KJV).

⁶ I Corinthians 13:1-13 (KJV).

⁷ Romans 5:5 (KJV).

⁸ Galatians 5:22 (KJV).

⁹ Isaiah 53:4-10 (KJV).

¹⁰ St. Luke 18:31-33 (KJV).

¹¹ I Corinthians 15:3 (KJV).

¹² Isaiah 53:10 (KJV).

¹³ Romans 5:8 (KJV).

¹⁴ Consider the words of St. Paul: “I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.” Galatians 2:20 (KJV).

¹⁵ Isaiah 53:5 (KJV).

¹⁶ Rector, St. Benedict’s Anglican Catholic Church, Chapel Hill, NC.

This ought to bring to life the words of Saint Luke:

*“Then he took unto him the twelve, and said unto them, Behold, we go up to Jerusalem, and all things that are written by the prophets concerning the Son of man shall be accomplished. For he shall be delivered unto the Gentiles, and shall be mocked, and spitefully entreated, and spitted on: And they shall scourge him, and put him to death: and the third day he shall rise again.”*¹⁰

Isaiah foretold that simple phrase, “*Christ died for our sins, according to the scriptures*”,¹¹ that is, in fulfillment of the Scriptures. And the words “*and He rose the third day, according to the scriptures*”—again, fulfilling the Scriptures. That He rose again fulfills the words of Isaiah, that after He was dead and buried “*He shall prolong His days.*”¹² And Saint Paul tells us that the love of God was commended toward us because, “*while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.*”¹³ I want to make this clear: In order to know the love of God for you, lift up your eyes and look at Jesus on His cross, dying in your place. You must take it personally.¹⁴ Once knowing that love, you can be given the strength to have such love for others, even for those who respond to it with hostility. This love is true freedom having no obligation to respond in kind to abuse; soaring above malice and bitterness, spreading mercy like wings.

Our creation itself is a gift, something God gave to us. Our redemption from sin and death is a gift as well. In the healing of the blind man in Chapter 18 of St. Luke’s Gospel, we see that God does not deal with us as our sins deserve. The blind man did not *deserve* to be healed because, like everyone of us, he was a sinner. But he was healed; he was given back the gift of eyesight. The healing of the blind man signifies that God forgives sin; every miracle of healing signifies this, because “*with His stripes we are healed.*”¹⁵ The healing of the blind man was a gift, given by the One Who earned that forgiveness for him, which he could not earn for himself. The question that we must ask is not: “Why are so many people not healed of

through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Homily:

I am glad that we use the old English, the Authorized, that is King James Bible. I prefer the use of the word “charity” to the word “love” for the Greek word, ἀγάπη or *agape* [**ah-gah-PAY**]. Our use of language follows certain traditions that predated the Bible in English. The word “charity” speaks very specifically of the highest kind of love, and cannot be used properly for anything lower. The English word, “charity” is from another old language, one into which the Bible was translated by Saint Jerome, namely Latin. *Agape* [**ah-gah-PAY**] was translated into the Latin *caritas* [**KARE-ih-tahs**]. The most famous line using that word is the one by Saint Augustine: *In Omnibus Caritas* [**in OMM-nih-boose KARE-ih-tahs**], “In all things charity.”

The word “love” is used in modern translations, but I am glad that more and more writers are rediscovering the word “charity.” It cannot be used in a way that confuses its meaning. You can say, “I love a big juicy steak” but you cannot say, “I have charity for a big juicy steak.” The possibility of interpreting the meaning of “love” in a selfish way disappears if we understand *agape* [**ah-gah-PAY**], or *caritas* [**KARE-ih-tahs**], that is, charity.

The modern world has been infected by theories of human psychology that no well-balanced person can accept. By these theories every action, every feeling, every thought is always selfish all the time. By these theories, every human thought, word and deed is predetermined by someone’s psychological condition; and everything is really completely selfish.

These theories destroy all notions of courage, and of giving, and of everything that comes from the virtue we call charity. And, these theories come, ultimately, from the enemy of mankind, the adversary of every human soul.

The highest of the virtues is charity, and the scriptures tell us that this kind of love is “shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost”.⁷ That is from Saint Paul’s Epistle to the Romans. And in his Epistle to the Galatians, he tells us that this love, *agape* [**ah-gah-PAY**], is the first of “the fruit of the Spirit”.⁸ In every way we are dependent on the Holy Spirit in order to have this virtue, because charity is the love of God Himself. And, this love can be planted and grown within us, but not simply from our efforts. We need the Holy Spirit of God.

To understand it, we must first know a bit of theology. We need to know God as He reveals Himself by His Word and by His Spirit. You see, to know this love we must first know that God is “Wholly Other”, that is, His nature is distinct from every created nature, visible and invisible. The angels do not share God’s nature, because they, like us, are creatures. God is Other. And, this must be followed by knowing the words of Saint Paul, that God “hath need of nothing.” The reason that *agape* [**ah-gah-PAY**] never seeks anything for itself, that it has no selfish element, is because God is completely without need of anything. God did not make the human race because He needed us. The love of God is satisfied in eternity within the Trinity of Persons, so that God is never alone. Man does not bring comfort, solace or companionship to the Trinity, because God “hath need of nothing.”

My younger brother, David, made a big splash with his first book, *The Beauty of the Infinite*. The most important point he made in it is that God made everything as gratuity; that is a gift. Creation is not necessary. The universe did not have to be. You did not have to be born. Our very existence is completely arbitrary and unnecessary, the result of extravagant Divine ge-

nerosity. Why, then, are we here? Not as objects that can give God anything, but as objects of His love.

Knowing this, we can again value the reality of every good thing that comes from the virtue called charity. Selflessness does exist, existing first in God’s gracious giving of life itself. The heroic sacrifice, the selfless pouring out of the heart, all comes first and foremost, and only, from the One Who is Love. The world is safe for romantics, or at least well-balanced individuals, after all; the most cold-hearted forms of clinical theory that would take away from us everything beautiful and noble, will be done away with when the heavens are rolled up as a scroll, and we see the Lord in His Glory face to face.

Knowing this, we can look again at today’s Second Lesson and see it for what it is. Hear the words of the prophet Isaiah from chapter 53:

“Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth. He was taken from prison and from judgment: and who shall declare his generation? for he was cut off out of the land of the living: for the transgression of my people was he stricken. And he made his grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death; because he had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth. Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hand.”⁹