

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER

The Fifth Sunday after Easter,
commonly called Rogation Sunday¹

(Year II)

Lessons:²

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the twenty-fourth Chapter of the Fourth Book of Moses, called Numbers.³

“And when Balaam [**BAY-lumm**] saw that it pleased the LORD to bless Israel, he went not, as at other times, to seek for enchantments, but he set his face toward the wilderness. And Balaam [**BAY-lumm**] lifted up his eyes, and he saw Israel abiding in his tents according to their tribes; and the spirit of God came upon him. And he took up his parable, and said, Balaam [**BAY-lumm**] the son of Beor [**BEE-awr**] hath said, and the man whose eyes are open hath said: He hath said, which heard the words of God, which saw the vision of the Almighty, falling into a trance, but having his eyes open: How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob, and thy tabernacles, O Israel! As the valleys are they spread forth, as gardens by the river’s side, as the trees of lign aloes which the LORD hath planted, and as cedar trees beside the waters. He shall pour the water out of his buckets, and his seed shall be in many waters, and his king shall be higher than Agag [**AY-gag**], and his kingdom shall be exalted. God brought him forth out of Egypt; he hath as it were the strength of an unicorn: he shall eat up the nations his enemies, and shall break their bones, and pierce them through with his arrows. He couched, he lay down as a lion, and as a great lion: who shall stir him up? Blessed is he that blesseth thee, and cursed is he that curseth thee.

“And Balak’s [**BAY-lacks**] anger was kindled against Balaam [**BAY-lumm**], and he smote his hands together: and Balak [**BAY-lack**] said unto Balaam [**BAY-lumm**], I called thee to curse mine enemies, and, behold, thou hast altogether blessed them these three times. Therefore now flee thou to thy place: I thought to promote thee unto great honour; but, lo, the LORD hath kept thee back from honour. And Balaam [**BAY-**

lumm] said unto Balak [**BAY-lack**], Spake I not also to thy messengers which thou sentest unto me, saying, If Balak [**BAY-lack**] would give me his house full of silver and gold, I cannot go beyond the commandment of the LORD, to do either good or bad of mine own mind; but what the LORD saith [**SETH**], that will I speak? And now, behold, I go unto my people: come therefore, and I will advertise thee what this people shall do to thy people in the latter days.

“And he took up his parable, and said, Balaam [**BAY-lumm]** the son of Beor [**BEE-awr**] hath said, and the man whose eyes are open hath said: He hath said, which heard the words of God, and knew the knowledge of the most High, which saw the vision of the Almighty, falling into a trance, but having his eyes open: I shall see him, but not now: I shall behold him, but not nigh: there shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel, and shall smite the corners of Moab, and destroy all the children of Sheth. And Edom shall be a possession, Seir [**SEE-ur**] also shall be a possession for his enemies; and Israel shall do valiantly. Out of Jacob shall come he that shall have dominion, and shall destroy him that remaineth of the city.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the sixth Chapter of the Epistle of Blessed Paul the Apostle to the Romans.⁴

“What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein? Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection: Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin.

For he that is dead is freed from sin. Now if we be dead with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him: Knowing that Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more; death hath no more dominion over him. For in that he died, he died unto sin once: but in that he liveth, he liveth unto God. Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof. Neither yield ye your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin: but yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God. For sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace.”

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.”⁵ 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.

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, SSC⁹
May 13, 2012

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

² *The Table of Lessons*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxviii (Anglican Church of Canada, 1962).

³ Numbers 24:1-19 (KJV).

⁴ Romans 6:1-14 (KJV).

⁵ St. John 12:24 (RSV).

⁶ I Corinthians 15:36-37, 40, 42-46 (RSV).

⁷ (1921-1983), sometime Dean of St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary and a leading 20th-Century Russian Orthodox theologian.

⁸ *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).

⁹ Bishop Ordinary, the Diocese of the Holy Cross; Rector, the Cathedral Church of the Epiphany, Columbia, SC.

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 Schmemmann⁷ 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 81⁸ at the top, we proclaim Jesus' mighty Resurrection, and His glorious 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,

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.’⁶

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.

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.

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!