

SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER
The Twentieth Sunday after Trinity
(Year II)

Lessons:¹

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the tenth Verse of the thirty-first Chapter of the Proverbs.²

“Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above rubies. The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her, so that he shall have no need of spoil. She will do him good and not evil all the days of her life. She seeketh wool, and flax, and worketh willingly with her hands. She is like the merchants’ ships; she bringeth her food from afar. She riseth also while it is yet night, and giveth meat to her household, and a portion to her maidens. She considereth a field, and buyeth it: with the fruit of her hands she planteth a vineyard. She girdeth her loins with strength, and strengtheneth her arms. She perceiveth that her merchandise is good: her candle goeth not out by night. She layeth her hands to the spindle, and her hands hold the distaff. She stretcheth out her hand to the poor; yea, she reacheth forth her hands to the needy. She is not afraid of the snow for her household: for all her household are clothed with scarlet. She maketh herself coverings of tapestry; her clothing is silk and purple. Her husband is known in the gates, when he sitteth among the elders of the land. She maketh fine linen, and selleth it; and delivereth girdles unto the merchant. Strength and honour are her clothing; and she shall rejoice in time to come. She openeth her mouth with wisdom; and in her tongue is the law of kindness. She looketh well to the ways of her household, and eateth not the bread of idleness. Her children arise up, and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praiseth her. Many daughters have done virtuously, but thou excellest them all. Favour is deceitful, and beauty is vain: but a woman that feareth the LORD, she shall be praised. Give her of the fruit of her hands; and let her own works praise her in the gates.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the twenty-second Verse of the twelfth Chapter of the Gospel according to St. Luke.³

“And he said unto his disciples, Therefore I say unto you, Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat; neither for the body, what ye shall put on. The life is more than meat, and the body is more than raiment. Consider the ravens: for they neither sow nor reap; which neither have storehouse nor barn; and God feedeth them: how much more are ye better than the fowls? And which of you with taking thought can add to his stature one cubit? If ye then be not able to do that thing which is least, why take ye thought for the rest? Consider the lilies how they grow: they toil not, they spin not; and yet I say unto you, that Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. If then God so clothe the grass, which is to day in the field, and to morrow is cast into the oven; how much more will he clothe you, O ye of little faith? And seek not ye what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink, neither be ye of doubtful mind. For all these things do the nations of the world seek after: and your Father knoweth that ye have need of these things.

“But rather seek ye the kingdom of God; and all these things shall be added unto you. Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell that ye have, and give alms; provide yourselves bags which wax not old, a treasure in the heavens that faileth not, where no thief approacheth, neither moth corrupteth. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the First Lesson:

“Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain,

¹ *The Table of Lessons*, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xvi (Anglican Church of Canada 1962).

² Proverbs 31:10-end (KJV).

³ St. Luke 12:22-34 (KJV).

⁴ Proverbs 31:30 (RSV).

⁵ *See, e.g.*, Genesis 1:26-31.

⁶ Proverbs 31:30 (RSV).

⁷ Exodus 18:21.

⁸ Job 28:28 (RSV).

⁹ I Kings 8:40; *cf.* Acts 10:35.

¹⁰ Supply Priest, Christ Anglican Catholic Pro-Cathedral Church, Metairie, LA; Priest-in-Charge, Holy Angels Anglican Catholic Mission, Picayune, MS; Honorary Canon, the Diocese of the Resurrection, and Honorary Canon and Canon to the Ordinary, the Diocese of New Orleans, The Anglican Catholic Church.

“Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain,
but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.”⁶

“The fear of the Lord” is something we find mentioned a number of times in Scripture and it is something that is easy to misunderstand. A proper and reverent fear of the Lord is not a negative or unproductive emotion; in the eyes of the ancient Jews, it is one of the well-springs of wise, prudent, and virtuous conduct. Thus one of the basic requirements for those Moses selected and set over the Israelites to lead and judge them was that these men had to fear God.⁷ So

“[T]he fear of the Lord, that is wisdom;
and to depart from evil is understanding.”⁸

Conclusion:

Such a fear is one of the factors that leads to long and satisfying lives.⁹ Therefore, it is something very much to be sought for and encouraged for the spirit of reverence and obedience which it inculcates.

And it is the person who possesses these qualities of reverence and obedience who will, without undue worry, but with due regard to the Lord’s gracious providence, and relying upon His loving care, make the wise provisions for survival that give a well-founded confidence about the future. It is this well-founded confidence that makes it unnecessary to indulge in the sort of fruitless—in fact, counter-productive—dithering and fluster that is properly termed anxiety.

—oo0oo—

The Rev’d Canon John A. Hollister¹⁰
October 21, 2012

but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.”⁴

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Homily:

To some readers, there is an apparent contradiction between this morning’s two Lessons, one that is reminiscent of the old fable about the grasshopper and the ant. To them, the Old Testament passage seems to be teaching an ethic of stewardship, as it praises the woman who, like the diligent ant, manages competently and gracefully all the multitude of tasks involved in running a household in the ancient world.

They see the New Testament passage, on the other hand, as seeming to urge us, like the grasshopper, to fling to the winds all provision of our own for our future well-being and instead recklessly to depend upon the Lord’s granting us, *ex nihilo*, the very means of basic subsistence.

If that reading of the New Testament Lesson were correct, the result would be a bit like a joke that circulated around my current home territory of New Orleans, after the devastating flood that occurred when the city’s levees broke in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. According to this story, a man was sitting on the roof of his house, surrounded by water up to its eaves, fervently praying to the Lord for relief from his peril.

A Coast Guard helicopter flew over him and the rescue swimmer called down, asking if the man wanted to be winched up, but he said he didn’t need the ride because he was waiting for the Lord to save him. Some time passed, then an outboard motor boat from the State Department of Wildlife and Fisheries came by. The Game Warden driving it asked if the man wanted to get off his roof and into the boat, but the man declined, saying he was waiting for the Lord to save him.

Then a rather longer time passed, after which an old Cajun came by, paddling a dugout pirogue [**PEA-rogue**], and asked if the man wanted to hop in and ride to safety. But the man refused, saying he was waiting on the Lord to save him.

After that, for a much longer time, nothing happened. In the sun, the roof got hotter, and the man on it got more and more dehydrated—for the water all around was completely polluted and undrinkable. So the man started praying again, only this time in a tone more querulous than supplicating: “Come on, Lord, what’s going on here? I’ve prayed and prayed, so why won’t you come and save me? It’s getting hot and thirsty up here, so what’s the hold-up?”

At this, a voice boomed down out of the clouds. “What do you mean, why won’t I save you? I sent you a helicopter and two boats, and you turned them all down. What were you waiting for, a guy in a bathrobe, with a long beard, bearing an invitation engraved on a stone tablet?”

Obviously, the man on that roof either had never read, or if he had read, he had forgotten, Benjamin Franklin’s wise aphorism, that the Lord helps those who help themselves. And, in that spirit, any conflict between today’s appointed Lessons is more apparent than real.

It is a basic principle of Scriptural interpretation that, just as both Testaments are equally inspired Scripture and both were written for our instruction and enlightenment, so both must be read together as conveying a consistent message of revelation and not as two disparate sets of injunctions. Therefore, whenever we encounter what might appear to be a disagreement between what the Old Testament seems to say on any subject and what the New Testament seems to say on that same subject, as might appear to be the case with today’s appointed Lessons, we must search carefully to find the common thread between the two.

If we look at today’s passages from this perspective, then we see that the Second Lesson is not forbidding us to make prudent plans for the uncertain future; after all, an interpretation such as that would run directly counter to the ethic of good stewardship that is so plainly laid down for us in the first chapters of Genesis⁵ and that runs through the whole course of Scripture after that.

To the contrary, what Our Lord is denigrating in today’s New Testament passage is not *prudence* or making wise provision, that is, “care” in the sense of “taking care of something”, but *anxiety* over the adequacy of those prudent provisions we have made, that is, “care” in the sense of “worry and care”. As any medical or mental health professional can tell you, anxiety is not a healthy protective instinct but rather a negative emotion that only creates debilitating stress.

As a symbol of this sort of prudence, when we look at today’s Old Testament passage, we see a carefully-drawn picture of a skilled housewife, the sort of woman whose multitude of talents, skills and abilities were essential to running the large urban households or rural farms that were such notable features of most cultures’ lives and economies, right up to the time of our own great-grandparents. In fact, in many places those attributes still are just as important as they always were. The author of the Proverbs praises such a multi-tasking manager, organizer, and artisan’s woman’s diligence and craftsmanship and there is nothing in that praise that is contradicted in Jesus’s allocution to His followers.

In fact, it is hard to imagine anyone who is less likely to feel the pangs of anxiety, proceeding as they so often do from an innate sense of inferiority or inadequacy, than is the sort of strong, skilled, self-confident, well-respected woman who is depicted in Proverbs. And the clue to her well-placed self-confidence is in the verse I quoted earlier as my text for this morning: