

FOOD FOR THE JOURNEY

19th – 25th February 2023

Week 7 (Year 1) /Beginning of Lent

Collect

GRANT, we pray, almighty God, that, always pondering spiritual things, we may carry out in both word and deed that which is pleasing to you. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, for ever and ever.

Monday of Week 7(Year 1)

Reading

Ecclesiasticus 1:1-10

In Praise of Wisdom

- 1 All wisdom comes from the Lord
and is with him for ever.
- 2 The sand of the sea, the drops of rain,
and the days of eternity—who can count them?
- 3 The height of heaven, the breadth of the earth,
the abyss, and wisdom—who can search them out?
- 4 Wisdom was created before all things,
and prudent understanding from eternity.
- 6 The root of wisdom—to whom has it been revealed?
Her clever devices—who knows them?
- 8 There is One who is wise, greatly to be feared,
sitting upon his throne.

- ⁹ The Lord himself created wisdom;
he saw her and apportioned her,
he poured her out upon all his works.
- ¹⁰ She dwells with all flesh according to his gift,
and he supplied her to those who love him.

Reflection

THE PROLOGUE to the Book of the Wisdom of Sirach is unusual not least in that it is not included in the modern chapter and verse framework. It is literally a 'prologue'. We begin a reading or two from Sirach (later given the nickname 'Ecclesiasticus' by Jewish scholars because of the fondness of the Church for this book) by reading the prologue:

“WHEREAS many great teachings have been given to us through the law and the prophets and the others that followed them, on account of which we should praise Israel for instruction and wisdom; and since it is necessary not only that the readers themselves should acquire understanding but also that those who love learning should be able to help the outsiders by both speaking and writing, my grandfather Jesus, after devoting himself especially to the reading of the law and the prophets and the other books of our fathers, and after acquiring considerable proficiency in them, was himself also led to write something pertaining to instruction and wisdom, in order that, by becoming conversant with this also, those who love learning should make even greater progress in living according to the law.

You are urged therefore to read with good will and attention, and to be indulgent in cases where, despite our diligent labour in translating, we may seem to have rendered some phrases imperfectly. For what was originally expressed in Hebrew does not have exactly the same sense when translated into another language. Not only this work, but even the law itself, the prophecies, and the rest of the books differ not a little as originally expressed.

When I came to Egypt in the thirty-eighth year of the reign of Eu-er'getes and stayed for some time, I found opportunity for no little instruction. It seemed highly necessary that I should myself devote some pains and labour to the translation of the following book, using in that period of time great watchfulness and skill in order to complete and publish the book for

those living abroad who wished to gain learning, being prepared in character to live according to the law.

”

Tuesday of Week 7(Year 1)

Reading

Ecclesiasticus 2:1-13

Duties toward God

- 2** My son, if you come forward to serve the Lord,
prepare yourself for temptation.
- 2** Set your heart right and be steadfast,
and do not be hasty in time of calamity.
- 3** Cleave to him and do not depart,
that you may be honoured at the end of your life.
- 4** Accept whatever is brought upon you,
and in changes that humble you be patient.
- 5** For gold is tested in the fire,
and acceptable men in the furnace of humiliation.
- 6** Trust in him, and he will help you;
make your ways straight, and hope in him.
- 7** You who fear the Lord, wait for his mercy;
and turn not aside, lest you fall.
- 8** You who fear the Lord, trust in him,
and your reward will not fail;
- 9** you who fear the Lord, hope for good things,
for everlasting joy and mercy.
- 10** Consider the ancient generations and see:
who ever trusted in the Lord and was put to shame?
Or who ever persevered in the fear of the Lord and was forsaken?
Or who ever called upon him and was overlooked?
- 11** For the Lord is compassionate and merciful;
he forgives sins and saves in time of affliction.
- 12** Woe to timid hearts and to slack hands,
and to the sinner who walks along two ways!
- 13** Woe to the faint heart, for it has no trust!
Therefore it will not be sheltered.

Reflection

TODAY'S reading, though Tuesday in Week 7(1) co-incides with Shrove Tuesday only occasionally, is very appropriate as we prepare ourselves for Lent. Ecclesiasticus is one of seven books that do not exist in their entirety in Hebrew or Aramaic and are therefore called 'deutero-canonical' – that is, belonging to a secondary list. These books are found in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. Legend tells us that the Egyptian king, Ptolemy Philadelphus (285-246 BC), ordered a translation of the Hebrew Bible to be made for the library in Alexandria. Seventy-two translators subsequently translated the Torah into Greek. As with the sending out of the 'Seventy Two' disciples by Jesus (Luke 10), there is ambiguity about 'Seventy' and 'Seventy Two'. Though 'Septuagint' suggests 70, and the abbreviation LXX is used for the Septuagint, there were probably six translators from each of the twelve tribes of Israel involved in the initial translation of the Pentateuch. The remaining books of the Old Testament, the Prophets and the Writings, were translated over the succeeding centuries. The Septuagint remains important not just because of the extra material – the seven deuteron-canonical books – but because it is the go-to text of the New Testament, which also of course was a Greek composition.

ASH WEDNESDAY

Collect

GRANT, O Lord, that we may begin with holy fasting this campaign of Christian service, so that, as we take up battle against spiritual evils. We may be armed with weapons of self-restraint. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, for ever and ever.

Reading

Matthew 6:1-18 (RSV)

Concerning Almsgiving

¹Beware of practising your piety before men in order to be seen by them; for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.

²Thus, when you give alms, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by men. Truly, I say to you, they have their reward. ³But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, ⁴so that your alms may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Concerning Prayer

⁵And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have their reward. ⁶But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

⁷And in praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard for their many words. ⁸Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him. ⁹Pray then like this:

Our Father who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name.
¹⁰Thy kingdom come,

Thy will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven.
¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread;
¹² And forgive us our debts,
As we also have forgiven our debtors;
¹³ And lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil.

¹⁴ For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; ¹⁵ but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Concerning Fasting

¹⁶ 'And when you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they have their reward. ¹⁷ But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, ¹⁸ that your fasting may not be seen by men but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Reflection

THE GOSPEL, as read in Church on Ash Wednesday, omits verses 7-15 of the passage as we have given it here. The passage omitted broadly comprises the Lord's Prayer, which receives separate attention on the Tuesday of the First Week of Lent. The three sections 'Almsgiving', 'Prayer', and 'Fasting', as I remark every Lent, deal with our relationship with others ('Almsgiving'), with God ('Prayer'), and with oneself ('Fasting'). In that sense, it would have been better, perhaps, if the Evangelist or his editor had begun with 'Prayer', though, of course, it is possible that what is being recalled is the Lord's own setting out of these religious tasks. They are the Christian equivalent of the five pillars of Islam – Islam also includes reciting the Muslim profession of faith and pilgrimage to Mecca – and we surely have something to learn – and recover from our history – if we took Lent as seriously as Muslims take *Ramadan* and punctuated the day with prayer in the disciplined way many Muslims approach *Salat*. Lent is about the quality of our spiritual lives, however, and not the number of duties performed so, most of all, it is a time to reflect on – and grow in – our work of almsgiving, prayer, and fasting.

Thursday after Ash Wednesday

Reading

Deuteronomy 30:15-20 (RSV)

See, I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil.

15 `See, I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil. **16** If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you this day, by loving the LORD your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his ordinances, then you shall live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land which you are entering to take possession of it. **17** But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, **18** I declare to you this day, that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land which you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess. **19** I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live, **20** loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice, and cleaving to him; for that means life to you and length of days, that you may dwell in the land which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them.'

Reflection

THE READINGS in Lent are no longer organised as *lectio continua*, where each day's readings continue from where the readings from the day before have left off. During Lent, different passages from different parts of the Bible, are selected as an anthology. So, today, as our Lenten discipline begins, we are presented with words from the third of four addresses by Moses to the people of Israel. The title 'Deuteronomy' combines 'second' and 'Law', so we are looking at a fresh presentation of the *Torah*, whenever that was done. There are several scholarly opinions about when the book was written, giving us very different dates in Israelite history, but it is essentially a call to a renewed and pure Judaism. Today, then, we are challenged to choose between life and good, on the one hand, and death and evil, on the other. Lent is a time for choice and the challenge is to choose life.

Friday after Ash Wednesday

Reading

Isaiah 58:1-9 (RSV)

False and True Worship

'Cry aloud, spare not,
lift up your voice like a trumpet;
declare to my people their transgression,
to the house of Jacob their sins.
2 Yet they seek me daily,
and delight to know my ways,
as if they were a nation that did righteousness
and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;
they ask of me righteous judgments,
they delight to draw near to God.
3 'Why have we fasted, and you see it not?
Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no
knowledge of it?'
Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure,^[a]
and oppress all your workers.
4 Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight
and to hit with wicked fist.
Fasting like yours this day
will not make your voice to be heard on high.
5 Is such the fast that I choose,
a day for a man to humble himself?
Is it to bow down his head like a rush,
and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him?
Will you call this a fast,
and a day acceptable to the LORD?
6 'Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of wickedness,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover him,
and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?
8 Then shall your light break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up speedily;

your righteousness shall go before you,
the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.

Reflection

IN EARLY Jewish practice, fasting was connected with seeking God's mercy. Difficult conditions, such as the threat of military defeat, prompted the need for corporate fasting. Fasting in this sense is very different from fasting in the Christian tradition where it becomes an ascetical practice, a means of self-regulation and improvement. In this passage from the last part of the Book of Isaiah, Judah is struggling with the restoration of Jerusalem after the Exile (see Zech 8:18-23). Will the city – Mount Zion – once again become glorious, will it become a focus for the nations? The message of the prophet here is that fasting in itself is insufficient. What is needed is justice, care for those in need, feeding and housing the poor. These actions would speak eloquently of God's glory and the holiness of God's people and bring about the restoration of Jerusalem.

Saturday after Ash Wednesday

Reading

Isaiah 58:9-14

Your light shall rise in the darkness

⁹ Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;
you shall cry, and he will say, Here I am.
'If you take away from the midst of you the yoke,
the pointing of the finger, and speaking wickedness,
¹⁰ if you pour yourself out for the hungry
and satisfy the desire of the afflicted,
then shall your light rise in the darkness
and your gloom be as the noonday.
¹¹ And the LORD will guide you continually,
and satisfy your desire with good things,
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters fail not.

12 And your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to dwell in.
13 'If you turn back your foot from the sabbath,
from doing your pleasure[□] on my holy day,
and call the sabbath a delight
and the holy day of the LORD honourable;
if you honour it, not going your own ways,
or seeking your own pleasure, or talking idly;
14 then you shall take delight in the LORD,
and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth;
I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.'

Reflection

THE MESSAGE of Isaiah 58, which we encountered in yesterday's reading, continues today. Yesterday we had the critique – fasting is of no avail without embracing social justice. Today we have the promise of the Lord's response to the prayers of a righteous people. Their light will shine forth amidst the darkness, and the ruined city of Jerusalem will be rebuilt. The return from the Babylonian exile was in 539 BC, following the edict of Cyrus the Persian Emperor. Judah became a satrap of Persia and work on the rebuilding of the temple commenced. And yet it took another twenty years to complete. Meanwhile there was a new emphasis on the sabbath, hitherto simply a day of rest, but now increasingly seen as a holy day and a focus for religious practice.