

## Homily for Trinity XX

+ Last year when I preached on these propers, I made the argument that the wedding garment in Christ's parable represents joy, that necessary response of redeemed humanity to the gracious provision of communion with God in Christ. Full entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven requires not merely an intellectual assent to the truths of God's saving work in history, but a transformation of the human soul, a turning from darkness to light, from despair to thanksgiving. This morning, I'd like to focus on the nature and shape of this joy.

The Old Testament lesson appointed for this morning helps us along here, but in a very roundabout manner. It comes to us again from the book of *Ecclesiastes*, which, fifteen weeks ago near the beginning of my odd project of bringing us back to the Old Testament, I had the opportunity to introduce. Fifteen weeks is enough time for me and for you to have forgotten a good deal. I won't go over it all again (cue deep sighs of relief); it is sufficient, I think, to remind ourselves that *Ecclesiastes* was written by King Solomon, the son of King David who was both famous for his wisdom and for the glory and prosperity of his reign over Israel. He was also notable, unfortunately, for his eventual turning away from the true and exclusive worship of God. I noted then that this turning away, this abandonment of his first and truest love, fatally tinged the character of Solomon, and contributed toward the later decline of Israel. We see, then, in *Ecclesiastes*, both the wisdom of Solomon on display, but intermixed with a certain weariness and cynicism. The whole work functions as a warning, and as a picture of a life in danger of joylessness.

In this morning's reading, Solomon writes:

For to him that is joined to all the living there is hope: for a living dog is better than a dead lion. For the living know that they shall die: but the dead know not any thing, neither have they any more a reward; for the memory of them is forgotten. Also their love, and their hatred, and their envy, is now perished; neither have they any more a portion for ever in any thing that is done under the sun.

On the one hand, this sentiment is remarkable, at least from a Christian standpoint. It's obvious from this passage that Solomon does not subscribe to the doctrine of the resurrection. In this, he functions as a forerunner of the Sadducees, that party of the Jews who denied the same doctrine in the lifetimes of both Jesus and St. Paul. This is an evaluation of human life that is preoccupied with what our prayerbook liturgy calls "this transitory life." How different is Solomon's analysis from his father's, that is, from David, who exults: "God hath delivered my soul from the power of the grave; for he shall receive me," and "I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." How different is Solomon, surrounded by luxury and prosperity, from the person of Job, whom we considered last week, and who, even in the midst of his ruin and deprivation, affirms: "I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: and though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God, whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another."

Yet, on the other hand, Solomon's evaluation of human life should not surprise us—it is the evaluation made by most of humanity through the great majority of history. It is the properly Pagan reaction to human mortality, and it is no wonder that, as Solomon's heart is turned from God to the gods, that he adopts this way of thinking. Homer, the greatest and most influential of the ancient poets, tells the story of Odysseus, who, in the course of his many travels, makes a journey even to the underworld, the shadowy abode of the dead. There, he is accosted by the shade of Achilles, the Greek hero *par excellence*: "How didst thou dare to come down to Hades, where dwell the unheeding dead, the phantoms of men outworn?" When Odysseus attempts to comfort his old friend, reminding him of the honors he received in life, and claiming high status for him even among the dead, Achilles is made

to reply: “Nay, seek not to speak soothingly to me of death, glorious Odysseus. I should choose, so I might live on earth, to serve as the hireling of another, of some portionless man whose livelihood was but small, rather than to be lord over all the dead that have perished.” Even more striking than Homer's myth is the image recorded for us by the English historian and Christian clergyman, known as the Venerable Bede. He records the visit of a Christian evangelist, St. Paulinus, to the pagan English of Northumbria. In response to his preaching, the pagan priests observe: “When we compare the present life of man on earth with that time of which we have no knowledge, it seems to me like the swift flight of a single sparrow through the banqueting-hall where you are sitting at dinner on a winter's day with your thegns and counsellors. In the midst there is a comforting fire to warm the hall; outside the storms of winter rain or snow are raging. This sparrow flies swiftly in through one door of the hall, and out through another. While he is inside, he is safe from the winter storms; but after a moment of comfort, he vanishes from sight into the wintry world from which he came. Even so, man appears on earth for a little while.”

This is the Pagan view of life, both ancient and modern—life begun and ended in mysterious and total darkness. In such a world, joy comes, if it comes, as an invader, an interloper, as we are all a series of sparks flying upward into night. Solomon's advice, given this evaluation, is what you might expect. He continues:

Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart; for God now accepteth thy works. Let thy garments be always white; and let thy head lack no ointment. Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of the life of thy vanity, which he hath given thee under the sun, all the days of thy vanity: for that is thy portion in this life, and in thy labour which thou takest under the sun. Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest.

Now, to be fair to Solomon, a great deal of wisdom is in this passage. Our life, including this mortal stage of it, is a precious gift, and one that ought to be rejoiced at. The good things of creation, and all its possibilities for delight, for fulfillment and relationship—these things are not to be lightly esteemed. The white garment—the anointed head—bread and wine—husband and wife; all these are the images that Christ himself employs, speaking of the kingdom of heaven as a marriage feast.

But it is at the end of his argument that King Solomon falters and fails, as he faltered at the end of his days. *For there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave*—in Hebrew, *in Sheol*, the ancient Hebrew equivalent of the Greek Hades—*whither thou goest*. For Solomon as for all the peoples of the ancient world, this mortal life ends in a mute, a blank, and terrible nothingness. It is a transitory life, but it is, if I can be forgiven for quoting 1980's rock lyrics in an Anglican homily, a “one way ticket to midnight.”

For Christians, who live in the light of Christ's resurrection, who abide by His promise, the situation is exactly reversed. *Walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, redeeming the time*, St. Paul writes, *because the days are evil*. For the non-Christian, as we have said, joy is a temporary invader into the vast and tragic substrate of the universe. It comes, flares up in fleeting brilliance, and is then snuffed out. For the Christian, it is tragedy itself that is the trespasser and the invader. In the Christian worldview, it is sin and death that are, ultimately, strangers and sojourners in a Divine cosmos whose fabric is grace, light, peace, and joy, the architecture of the Word of God in Christ, by whom the worlds were made. Sin, death, and corruption are then, in the vision of God, merely smudges in need of cleaning, or rifts in need of mending—not the principles of the universe, not a dark ocean out of which we emerge for the space of a breath and into which we are so quickly plunged again. For the Christian, this life is transitory, but death is only the passage to greater life.

The temptation of the pagan, and the temptation that ultimately overcame Solomon, has to do

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with the different definition of joy which comes about as a result of their philosophy. If joy comes only in the brief space of mortal life, if its parameters are defined by the physicality of this space, then we are tempted toward a life of endlessly grasping and desperate acquisition and excess. To watch someone consumed with this insatiable questing after material pleasures—things, money, partners, experiences, notches on an ever-shortening belt—is to witness a tragedy indeed. Failure, disillusionment, dissipation, self-destruction, mental, physical, and spiritual collapse—these are the inevitable results.

The Christian however, in sensing a Divine grace which flows under the whole of life, which brings it into being, and constantly re-creates and sustains it, realizes that life is not a stranger who has wandered into death's eternal realm for a brief space, but rather that death, that sin, that corruption are parasites on the Divine order. As such, our enjoyment of the good things of this life comes, not with the abandoned and ultimately tragic pursuit of Pagan man, but with the responsibility of measurement and discretion that is proper to the Christian. In this present life there is good, and we see it, but we know it's source; we know that the creation, like us, is on a journey toward redemption, and it toward the Redeemer that we principally direct our ultimate attention, not allowing those things which proclaim His goodness to usurp His place. *Be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord; giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.* St. Paul uses the images of music—of melody, of psalms and hymns—to describe this properly measured and Christian joy. It is a music made by many, with point and counterpoint, in harmonies that weave in and out of each other. True, there are passages of that music that are sung in a minor key. But ultimately, it is the song of the marriage-feast of the lamb. To that feast we are called. We now go up and enter in, though we are also yet on the way. Let us approach with joy, in the white wedding-garment of thanksgiving for our redemption, and sing now as we will sing forever: *Behold, the Lamb of God, that takest away the sin of the world.* +Amen.