

Homily: Proper 17, 2025

Year C

Ecclesiasticus 10:7-18

Fr. Robert J. Gaestel

Hebrews 13:1-18

St. Luke 14:1, 7-14

In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Many, many years ago, in the middle of my life's journey, like Dante, I found myself lost in a dark wood. Like Dante, this dark wood was not physical, but metaphorical. I had received in the mail a letter from the Bishop's Office, a letter that had been sent to all the clergy. It was so long ago that I don't now remember what it was about. All I know is that it was about something significant and it was disturbing, but I just don't remember why. I could not make heads or tails out of it and I didn't know what to do. At that time, my Senior Warden was a woman who was a senior project manager at Lockheed. She had been part of the top-secret Skunk Works. She came to my office and I showed her the letter confessing my confusion about it all. She took time to read it carefully. When she finished, she put it down and in a quiet voice said to me, "It's not real." And then, as it says in the Good Book, "My eyes were opened and I knew that **they** were naked." "It's not real." The only thing real about it was that it was not real.

Today's Scriptures are from a genre in the Bible called, "The Wisdom Tradition," or "The Wisdom Books." The Wisdom Books are not about history. They are not prophecy as in discerning the future in the light of what is happening now. The Wisdom Books are not about legislation or the adjudication of cases. The Wisdom Books are not about the mechanics of organized religion. The Wisdom Books are about what is real. The Wisdom Books are about how things really are, and what things really work and what things never do. The Wisdom Tradition gives guidance about the practical, down-to-earth business of living. Yet, for all its pragmatism, the Wisdom Tradition is grounded on what of all that is, is the most real. Today, Jesus gives voice to wisdom as that which is most real, cutting through all confusion and drawing back the curtain to disclose what is most real because it is unlimited and unending. "You will be repaid at the resurrection of the just."

You will be repaid at the resurrection of the just. From everything said thus far, this probably sounds really weird. The Wisdom Books say absolutely nothing about a resurrection of the just, though in a passage from The Wisdom of Solomon, there is a hint of a life beyond death in "But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God and there shall no torment touch them. To us they seemed to have died, but they are at peace."

By way of reminder, the Wisdom Books of the Bible are: Psalms, Proverbs, Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, and Job. In addition, there are two other books, The Wisdom of Solomon, or just "Wisdom," just quoted above, and Ecclesiasticus, also known as Sirach, from which came today's first reading. These two are from the Hebrew Bible that was translated into Greek before the coming of Christ. The Hebrew text used for this Greek translation no longer exists. Books in the Greek Old Testament not found in the current Hebrew Bible are gathered into a collection called the Apocrypha. Regardless of the source, all these Wisdom Books are about how to live in the world as the world really is; and living in the world as the world really is, here is what works, and here is what doesn't.

Being repaid at the resurrection of the just does not fit within these parameters. Instead, one could boil the Wisdom Tradition down to the words of a well-known contemporary person who is known as “The Oracle of Omaha”: Warren Buffett. His words of wisdom are not confined to investing, as in buy low and sell high. In fact, it’s not about investing at all. He says, “You know, it is very good to learn from your mistakes. It’s even better to learn from other people’s mistakes.” You might say that this is a good summary of the Bible’s Wisdom Books.

Today’s reading from Ecclesiasticus is a catalogue of mistakes made by others so that we don’t make them ourselves. Is Ecclesiasticus saying anything that we don’t already know? Many people understand the Bible, particularly the Old Testament as a history book. It’s about what happened a long time ago all the way back to “In the beginning.” It is that, but it’s not just about what happened, but more importantly what always happens. Did anything in today’s reading come as a surprise? If any of these things takes one by surprise, it’s because someone said, and people believed, not famous last words, but famous first words: “It’s different this time.” No, it’s not different this time. All the things that that Ecclesiasticus said centuries ago it would be really good to avoid, are still good to avoid and people still don’t avoid. The consequences following on these actions back then are the same consequences that follow on these actions done now.

Where Ecclesiasticus talks about what to avoid, today’s reading from Hebrews talks about what things to embrace and enact. Where Ecclesiasticus gives a list of vices, the Letter to the Hebrews gives a list of values and virtues. Where the consequences of vices are predictable, the fruits of virtues are incalculable, as in there was more to the ones Abraham welcomed and served than met the eye. Not only that, but compassion shown to any overcome by adversity can make all the difference in the world to them, and beyond them to others we don’t see now and may never see.

Like Ecclesiasticus, Hebrews speaks of very practical-down-to-earth, easily observable, what-always-happens kinds of things that touch the lives of everyone. What things? Well, marriage and sexuality. There is a new book out called Lower Than the Angels: A History of Sex and Christianity. It is 687 pages long. In this dimension of human life, everything has been tried. Hebrews condenses the issue of what works and what doesn’t into two things: exclusivity and permanence. Another thing that touches the lives of everyone are possessing and being possessed by. Hebrews condenses all of what does and what does not work down to contentment. Finally, something that touches the lives of everyone is seeking good advice and guidance. Hebrews condenses all possible influences and influencers down to words of ultimate value and the examples of those who have lived by it.

This is all well and good except that in the world as the world really is, it can and it does happen that one can do everything right, and through no fault of one’s own, things still turn out badly. Ecclesiastes, not Ecclesiasticus, and attributed to King Solomon puts it this way. “The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, but time and chance happen to them all.” What gives? In the middle of the Book of Job, the flow is interrupted by the 28<sup>th</sup> Chapter. It is really worth reading. Essentially it says that in creation there is a place for everything and everything fits together and it gives examples of how this is so. But then it asks, “Where shall wisdom be found? And where is the place of understanding?” It answers that wisdom will not be found in any of these things. “God alone understands the way to wisdom, and he knows its place.” What is that?

Paraphrasing the end of the book The Phenomenon of Man, by the Jesuit priest and paleontologist Teilhard de Chardin is this:

*For reasons of both practical convenience and probably of intellectual timidity, the City of God is too often described in conventional and purely moral terms. People view God and the world he governs as a vast association, conceived in terms of a family or government and understood in a purely legal manner. The fundamental root from which the sap of Christianity has risen from the beginning and is nourished, is not this at all. People often think that Christianity is about obeying the rules and being helpful and nice, when it's actually about so much more. Christianity is really the most realistic and at the same time the most cosmic of beliefs and hopes. At its heart, Christianity is about our humanity transfigured as beheld in Christ whose redeeming Incarnation is the summit of all wisdom: what is ultimately real and what really works.*

In the end, Job gets back everything that was taken from him and he got it all back in spades. “And after this Job lived 140 years and died an old man full of days.” All of this only after Job answered the Lord, “I know that you can do all things, that I uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful that I did not know.” “Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is the beginning of wisdom”

This is as far as the Wisdom Tradition by itself can take us. It is the dawning that gives way to daybreak which is today's Gospel, where Jesus gives the most practical of practical advice; which in the end is not about reciprocity, but grace that can in no way be imagined, anticipated, or calculated. In the Gospel, the dinner party given by the Pharisee is merely an investment. Jesus speaks of and Jesus embodies, and Jesus bestows charity: gift without limit, making practical wisdom the means by which we can prepare ourselves to receive it. What in Job's words is, “I heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you, Jesus calls being repaid in the resurrection of the just.