

Sunday 12th February 2017

The Third Sunday before Lent

Septuagesima Proper 2

Green



Collect.

O God, you know us to be set in the midst of so many and great dangers, that by reason of the frailty of our nature we cannot always stand upright: Grant to us such strength and protection as may support us in all dangers and carry us through all temptations; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Deuteronomy 30:15-20 English Standard Version (ESV)

The Choice of Life and Death

¹⁵ “See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil. ¹⁶ If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God^[a] that I command you today, by loving the LORD your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules,^[b] then you shall live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that 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 today, that you shall surely perish. You shall not live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess. ¹⁹ I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, ²⁰ loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days, that you may dwell in the land that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them.”

Footnotes: a. Septuagint; Hebrew lacks *If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God*. b. or *his just decrees*

COMMENT: We have here the Deuteronomic formula (of obedience to the Law) that became the motif for so much of the final rendition of the Old Testament documents in the centuries following the return of the exiles

from Babylon in 639 BC. This was especially true of the Books of Joshua and Judges, many Psalms and the Books of Chronicles. God's covenant with Israel required absolute obedience to the Torah as defined by the commandments given to Moses at Mount Sinai. Life, prosperity and the inheritance of the Promised Land depended on this obedience.

Matthew 5:21-37 English Standard Version (ESV)

Anger

²¹ “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ ²² But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother^[a] will be liable to judgment; whoever insults^[b] his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell^[c] of fire. ²³ So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. ²⁵ Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison. ²⁶ Truly, I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.^[d]

Lust

²⁷ “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ ²⁸ But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹ If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. ³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.

Divorce

³¹ “It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ ³² But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

Oaths

³³ “Again you have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn.’ ³⁴ But I say to you, Do not take an oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, ³⁵ or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. ³⁶ And do not take an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. ³⁷ Let what you say be simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from evil.^[e]

Footnotes: a. some manuscripts insert *without cause*. b. Greek says *Raca* to (a term of abuse). c. Greek *Gehenna*; also verses 29, 30. d. Greek *kodrantes*, Roman copper coin (Latin *quadrans*) worth about 1/64 of a *denarius* (which was a day’s wage for a labourer). e. *or the evil one*.

COMMENT: A number of the original commandments surface in this selection from the Sermon on the Mount: murder, adultery and false witness. It is unlikely that Jesus addressed them all on this on one occasion. In Matthew’s presentation here, however, they all continue what he had quoted Jesus as saying that he had come to complete, not to abolish the Law of Moses. These extensions or implications of the ancient Hebrew traditions Law still present us with deep challenges. On divorce – it’s not so much that God hates divorce – it’s that God loves Marriage. God is our Father, and like any loving father or parent he cares for us and wants our welfare, in tension with his welfare for all. It’s not just about us, and our selfish desires. We need to step past those for a more mature and humble approach. Even where we have strayed from God’s will, he God loves us, and welcomes back his contrite and prodigal children.

Psalm 121 *Levai oculos*

℟ Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

¹ I lift up my eyes to the mountains;
from where shall come my help?

² My help shall come from the Lord
who made heaven and earth. ℟

³ May he never allow you to stumble!
Let him sleep not, your guard.

⁴ No, he sleeps not nor slumbers,
Israel’s guard. ℟

⁵ The Lord is your guard and your shade;
at your right side he stands.

⁶ By day the sun shall not smite you
nor the moon in the night. **R**

⁷ The Lord will guard you from evil,
he will guard your soul.

⁸ The Lord will guard your going and coming
both now and for ever. **R**

**Glory be to the Father and to the Son
and to the Holy Spirit,
As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,
world without end. Amen.**

COMMENT: The message of the biblical psalm is simple and powerful: God watches over us as permanently as the mountains mark the horizon. Originating also as an antiphonal hymn, the psalm may have been sung by pilgrims approaching the temple mount among the holy hills of Jerusalem after a perilous journey through territory infested with brigands. The ancient road up from Jericho in the Jordan valley was just such a place. Vss. 3-4 reflect the terror of a sleepless sentry lest he doze while on watch at night. This psalm excels as poetry in any language. The Hebrew has a repetitive parallelism rising to a climactic affirmation of faith. It opens with a plea for divine help and the response rings throughout, “the Lord is your keeper.” In an ever insecure world, the words in any version touch the deepest spiritual chords in every human heart.

Post Communion.

God of tender care, in this Eucharist we celebrate your love for us and for all people. May we show your love in our lives and know its fulfilment in your presence. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

The Blessing.

May God, who in Christ gives us a spring of water welling up to eternal life, perfect in you the image of his glory; and the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be among *you*, and remain with *you* always. **Amen.**