

EIGHTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME-C

March 3, 2019

First Reading – Sirach 27:4-7

Responsorial Psalm – Psalm 92

Second Reading – 1 Corinthians 15:54-58

Gospel – Luke 6: 39-45

My dear people of God:

As we approach Lent (which starts this Wednesday, the sixth of March), the church offers us some wonderful insights on the characteristics of wisdom and the excellence of wisdom, as stated in the Book of Sirach.

Biblical scholars say that Jeshua ben Eleazar ben Sira (*not Sirach*) is the author. From internal evidence it seems he completed his work in Hebrew after 190 BC, but before 175 BC. For he praises the high priest Simon II (220-195 BC). He prays to the Lord to deliver Jerusalem - which fits the situation after 190 BC.

They teach that by about 200 B.C. there were more Jews living outside Palestine than in there. Although Antiochus III was tolerant of Jewish customs, Hellenistic (Greek) influence continued to come into Jewish society, especially in Jerusalem, the upper classes tempted to look on their own literature as lower than Greek drama, poetry, and philosophy. So Jeshua ben Eleazar ben Sira (or the Book of Sirach) aimed at the best young Jews of his day to try to keep them from falling under the spell of Hellenism (Greek culture). The author was a well-traveled man, and seems familiar with Greek and Egyptian literature.

Biblical scholars and historians tell us that Jeshua's grandson translated the work into Greek in Egypt in 132 BC, the 38th year of Ptolemy VIII Euergetes.

Brothers and sisters, the first reading can teach us how to live our social lives and profit from it spiritually. The Book of Sirach (other bibles call it the “Book of Ecclesiasticus”, not to be confused with the **Book of Ecclesiastes or the Book of Qoheleth**), is a rich source of happy living.

Now, let us go to the Second Reading: Paul is teaching us that when the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory."

Paul talks about the glorious change and repetitively gives the details in full delightfully.

When will change happen? Paul does not give the exact time. Paul understood Isaiah's prophecy about God's victory over death in chapter 25, verse 8 that says: "***He will swallow up death for all time, And the Lord God will wipe tears away from all faces. He will take away the disgrace His people have suffered. Death shall be no more.***"

The strong declaration of Paul has become so influential that we could read this in literary pieces:

(1) The poet John Bowring quoted St. Paul in his poem: "***Death! Where Is Thy Sting?***" "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"

(2) The great botanist, philosopher, poet, social scientist and social critic, Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) said in Walden: "***When the wild river valley and the woods were bathed in so pure and bright a light as would have waked the dead, if they had been slumbering in their graves, as some suppose. There needs no stronger proof of immortality. All things must live in such a light. O Death, where was thy sting? O Grave, where was thy victory then?***"

3. And even the great playwright and poet, William Shakespeare asked in Sonnet VI: "***what could death do?***". Sonnet VI goes this way:

*Then let not winter's ragged hand deface,
In thee thy summer, ere thou be distilled:
Make sweet some vial; treasure thou some place
With beauty's treasure ere it be self-killed.
That use is not forbidden usury,
Which happies those that pay the willing loan;
That's for thy self to breed another thee,
Or ten times happier, be it ten for one;
Ten times thy self were happier than thou art,
If ten of thine ten times refigured thee:
Then what could death do if thou shouldst depart,
Leaving thee living in posterity?
Be not self-willed, for thou art much too fair
To be death's conquest and make worms thine heir.*

I underscored the line I just quoted: what could death do?

I strongly reiterate: these words of St. Paul must be powerful words because the greatest literary minds even used them.

Brothers and sisters: Paul tells us that sin gives death its sting, and the law gives sin its power. Thanks be to God, sin and death will be gone; and the law, which reveals our sins, will no longer be our judge. "But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Allow me to make a short comment on the last verse (58) of our second reading. It says: "*Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.*"

Paul says casually, "THEREFORE". Obviously, he is making a conclusion of what he said in the preceding verses. It should make us aware that this ending of his teaching is now an exhortation to action: the "*give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord.*" This is not just any "church work" but the work of the Lord. It is in doing with conviction and dedication this work that our labor is rewarded.

Now, let us go to the gospel. In these seven verses, our Lord Jesus Christ gives a very sobering, instructive parable, a parable by which He warns us about three great spiritual dangers:

- 1· The Danger of Following False Prophets
- 2· The Danger of Self-righteousness and Hypocrisy
- 3· The Danger of a Deceived Heart

First, He warns us of the great danger of following false prophets (verses 39-40). These two verses are to be understood together. They cannot be separated. Our Lord is telling us plainly that those who follow false prophets shall perish with them.

If I follow a blind man, I cannot be walking in the light, and both of us will fall. If I follow Christ, the perfect Teacher, I shall at last be made perfect with Him.

At this point, please allow me to digress a bit: with the news of this bishop or that priest convicted of sexual abuse, with this or that bishop covering such sexual abuse by his priest, who would wish to follow priests now? I need your prayers so that I will not become a false prophet. I need my credibility to be high.

While Jesus walked on the earth, He warned the Jews already of the great danger of false prophets. Pharisees and scribes were always His targets. This warning of Jesus is more valid NOW than ever. I do not wish to talk about false religions. I am talking about us, Catholic priests. We pose more danger to your children and grandchildren if we are not honest, if we prey on your children instead of protecting/guiding them. That is why we need your prayers so that we will never betray your trust.

This is what our Lord teaches us in these two verses. If we hear and follow false prophets, we will go to hell with them. We need to be children of the Light and walk in the Light.

In Matthew's gospel, Jesus said in chapter 7, verses 13 to 15: *"Enter at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leads to destruction, and many go there. Because strait is the*

gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it. {15} Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves."

Second: Jesus warns us of the great danger of self-righteousness and hypocrisy.

"Why do you notice the splinter in your brother's eye, but do not perceive the wooden beam in your own? How can you say to your brother, 'Brother, let me remove that splinter in your eye,' when you do not even notice the wooden beam in your own eye? You hypocrite! Remove the wooden beam from your eye first; then you will see clearly to remove the splinter in your brother's eye (verses 41-42).

Self-righteousness and hypocrisy always go together. It is impossible to have one without the other. Nothing is more natural to man or more obnoxious to God than self-righteousness and hypocrisy.

How does a self-righteous person behave? He justifies himself and condemns others. The self-righteous person finds splinters in the eyes of others and ignores the two-by-four beam in his own eyes. We all have the tendency to commit this mistake, and we need to acknowledge and confess our sins before God. With God's help, we struggle constantly with our two-by-four beams in our own eyes, so that we can then see the splinters in the eyes of others more clearly.

A self-righteous person boasts of his attainments, while a repentant sinner grieves over his failures. A self-righteous person thinks himself to be strong and superior to others, while the saintly knows himself to be weak and inferior to his brethren. A self-righteous person (a hypocrite) goes about parading his righteousness, while the believer looks to Christ for righteousness (Rom. 10:1-4).

Third: Our Lord warns us of the great danger of a deceived heart (verses 43-45).

"A good tree does not bear rotten fruit, nor does a rotten tree bear good fruit. For every tree is known by its own fruit. For people do not pick figs from thornbushes, nor do they gather grapes from brambles.

A good person out of the store of goodness in his heart produces good, but an evil person out of a store of evil produces evil; for from the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks."

It does not matter how good our religion looks on the outside, "the Lord looks on the heart." It does not matter how much we impress men, or ourselves for that matter, with what we say and do, "the Lord looks on the heart." It does not matter how sound our doctrine is, "the Lord looks on the heart." It does not matter how precisely we keep the ordinances, "the Lord looks on the heart."

It does not matter how much money we give to the collection basket, or how many chapters of the Scriptures we read, or how much we pray, or how often we attend church, "the Lord looks on the heart." God wants our hearts. God demands our hearts. The root of the matter is the heart.

Amen.