

**Sermon for the Twenty-sixth Sunday after Pentecost,
November 18, 2018**

Solemn Evensong

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

*Year 2, Proper 28: 1 Maccabees 2:29–43, 49–50, Philippians 3:13–4:1,
John 6:35–40*

We began reading from the First Book of the Maccabees this past week on Thursday night. Since the English Reformation, Anglicans have used the books we call the Apocrypha—from the Greek word for “hidden things.” (I’m not sure why they picked up that name.) They are books that were in the early Greek-language Hebrew Bible, known as the Septuagint, that was the basis of the first Christian Bibles. But these books, known in Greek, did not find a place in the Hebrew Bible—which came together among the Jews between the seventh and tenth centuries of the Common Era.¹

Among the books of the Apocrypha, the first two books of the Maccabees are important as historical and theological records. For the record, there are also two others, known as the Third and the Fourth Book of the Maccabees—that have had a place in the development of Christian thought.²

A Hebrew version of the First Book of the Maccabees was known to Jerome, who translated the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures into Latin. (He died in the year 420.) But no Hebrew text has survived.³ Martin Luther in his German Bible put the Apocrypha between

¹ *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2ed. (New York: Oxford University Press 1978), *s.v.* “Apocrypha,” 70–71.

² *Ibid.*, *s.v.* “Maccabees, Books of,” 855.

³ *Ibid.*

the Old and New Testaments and described them as “books which are not held equal to the sacred Scriptures, and nevertheless are useful to read.”⁴ We Anglicans did the same and described these in this way, “And the other Books (as Hierome saith) the Church doth read for example of life and instruction of manners; but yet doth it not apply them to establish any doctrine.”⁵

Two passages from the Apocrypha that are familiar to Episcopalians are the reading from Ecclesiasticus for All Saints’ Day that begins, “Let us now praise famous men, and our fathers in their generations”⁶ and the reading from the Wisdom of Solomon that begins, “But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them.”⁷ Many Anglicans who identify themselves “evangelical” will not read these, but they are in our Bibles and are appointed to be read in the Episcopal Church at the Eucharist and at the Daily Office.

As an aside, I grew up with a King James’ Version of the Bible without the Apocrypha, and, more importantly, without the preface called, “From the Translators to the Readers.”⁸ It’s a pretty extensive defense of the work of the translators and the challenges they faced. The translators had an awareness that there were things in the original texts that they weren’t sure how to translate—and, for example, that a word in Greek could be translated by one or

⁴ *The Oxford Annotated The Apocrypha of the Old Testament Revised Standard Version Expanded Edition containing the Third and Fourth Books of the Maccabees and Psalm 151*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), x.

⁵ *The Book of Common Prayer*, [1979], 868.

⁶ Ecclesiasticus 44:1.

⁷ Wisdom 3:1.

⁸ *The Holy Bible with the Apocrypha* (Cambridge: University Press, Brooke Crutchley, University Printer, n.d.), v.–xvii.

more different words in an English sentence. One wonders how our church history might have differed if the complete Bible had become the standard for everyone.

So, the struggles of the Hebrew people against their overlords, the Seleucid kings of Syria in the second century before Christ, though the Hebrew people were never to be completely independent until the foundation of the modern State of Israel.

I read the lesson from first Maccabees Friday night. It included these words, “According to the decree, they put to death the women who had their children circumcised, and their families and those who circumcised them; and they hung the infants from their mothers’ necks. But many in Israel stood firm and were resolved in their hearts not to eat unclean food. They chose to die rather than to be defiled by food or to profane the holy covenant; and they did die.”⁹

Last night we had the story of Mattathias and his sons refusing to sacrifice to an idol and fleeing to the hills.

Tonight we hear of the slaughter of innocent Jewish men, women, and children, who refused to fight back on a sabbath. Mattathias and those with him and his sons fought back.

There is something haunting “in living memory of the Holocaust” about the stories of the Maccabees, not to mention the far, far greater slaughter done by Communist regimes in the twentieth century—Cambodia, the Soviet Union, and Communist China, to name the most horrific examples. Maccabees bears witness to the

⁹ 1 Maccabees 1:60–63.

need to survive, the need to defeat evil and to the accidents and graces of survival.

There is nothing easy about confronting evil. It scars its victims and those who survive. But by God's grace humankind continues to move into the future with opportunities to know God and serve God as God wishes humankind to do.

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

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