

Homily for Friday in the Fourth Week of Lent

March 27, 2020

The Holy Eucharist

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Wisdom 2:1a, 12–24; Psalm 34:15–22; John 7:1–2, 10, 25–30

The book of the Bible we know as the Wisdom of Solomon is a Jewish writing that has never been a part of the Jewish scriptures. It was accepted as scripture by important third-century Christian writers and became a part of the Bible in the Christian East and West.¹ At the English Reformation, it was placed apart from the books of the Old Testament which were known in the original Hebrew. These Greek-language pre-Christian texts in the Bible were called the Apocrypha—meaning “hidden things.” The Apocrypha was included as a separate group in all of the English language Bibles of the sixteenth century and in the King James Version at the beginning seventeenth century.²

Though today’s first lesson is included as an optional reading for liturgy of Good Friday, most of us will have heard it read at the Sunday Eucharist in

¹ Lester L. Grabbe, “Wisdom of Solomon,” *New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha, An Ecumenical Study Bible*, ed. Michael D. Coogan, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1427.

² *The Apocrypha of the Old Testament, Revised Standard Version* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), x.

September of Year B of the lectionary cycle. One theme of this book is that “immortality is the reward of wisdom.”³

The reading is part of a longer passage that can be called a polemic, an argument, against those who are no longer faithful to their Jewish religion.⁴ They were people who did not believe in life after death. The late Old Testament scholar Lester Grabbe, a Roman Catholic priest, used the words “practical atheism” to describe their approach to life⁵—one might say that practical atheism describes many people in our own time and place.

Father Grabbe notes the background of the fourth Servant Song in Isaiah, about the suffering and glory of God’s servant.⁶ The song begins:

Behold, my servant shall prosper, he shall be exalted and lifted up, and shall be very high. As many were astonished at him—his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the sons of men—so shall he

³ Addison G. Wright, “Wisdom,” *The Jerome Biblical Commentary: Volume I: The Old Testament*, Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy, eds. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc.), 556–68.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 559.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Isaiah 52:13–53:14.

startle many nations; kings shall shut their mouths because of him; for that which has not been told them they shall see, and that which they have not heard they shall understand.⁷

With respect to the Jewish heritage of all Christians and, I hope, a genuine awareness of how Christians' anti-Judaism still calls us to "mourn the sins of which [we] are guilty,"⁸ we can see the words from Wisdom reminding us of the grace of God that takes us beyond the challenges, circumstances, and failings of our humanity. I'm very glad we have these words from around the year 20 BCE to ponder.⁹ They are an ancient help for us as we face the uncertainty of the days in which we are living now.

May the Divine Assistance remain with us always and with those who are absent from us.

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

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⁷ Isaiah 52:13–15.

⁸ *The Book of Occasional Services* (2003), 66.

⁹ Grabbe, 1427.