

Homily for Ephrem of Edessa, Syria, Deacon, 373

June 10, 2020

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Proverbs 3: 1–7; Psalm 98: 5–10; Matthew 13: 47–52

My uncle, Lawrence Matthews, is eighty-seven years old now. He is a retired Baptist minister, his last years as an American Baptist. He and the congregation he served left the Southern Baptist Convention over the issue of the ordination of women. He's been retired since, I think, 1997.

When I became a rector in Indiana, he encouraged me to run a Bible study and I did. One thing I have missed since coming to Saint Mary's is being in a Bible study or leading a Bible study. It's something I hope to do again after I retire. If you haven't had a chance to read Father Powell's online study of Exodus, I want to commend it to you. As many of you know, he's really good.

Among the books I would like to know better are the Proverbs, from which the lesson was read today for the commemoration of Ephrem of Edessa, Syria, since World War I, in southern Turkey, who died in the year 373. Another is Ecclesiastes. It's being read this week at Daily Morning Prayer.

Lesser Feasts and Fasts describes Ephrem as “a teacher, poet, orator, and defender of the faith—a voice of Aramaic Christianity.”¹ *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* describes his writings as, “voluminous, exegetical, dogmatic, and controversial.”² He wrote hymns and litanies that are still used in the Christian East. He was a defender of the faith against the Arians and, a related group that I had never heard of before reading this entry, the Anomoeans.³

The Proverbs and Ecclesiastes are part of what we call Wisdom literature, and like all biblical studies, it is a large subject. In addition to Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, the wisdom books in the Hebrew Bible are Job and the Song of Solomon. In the Apocrypha there are two, the Wisdom of Solomon and Ecclesiasticus.⁴

In an article for the *Jerome Biblical Commentary*, the late Father Roland Murphy, a Carmelite priest, and the first Roman Catholic to teach at Duke Divinity School.⁵ In an appreciation after his death, one his

¹ *Lesser Feasts and Fasts 2006* (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated, 2006), 280.

² *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2ed. (New York: Oxford University Press 1978), s.v. “Ephraem Syrys,” 462–63.

³ *Ibid.*, 463.

⁴ Roland E. Murphy, “Introduction to Wisdom Literature,” *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.), 487.

⁵ <http://heroesfoundfaithful.blogspot.com/2010/11/father-roland-e-murphy.html>, (accessed 10 June 2020).

students noted that he was always called Father Murphy. Murphy wrote, “The theme of wisdom as a divine communication is an important theological development . . . wisdom literature witnesses that God does communicate himself . . . [and] it leaves open the possibility of a supreme communication in Jesus Christ, whom Paul calls the ‘wisdom of God.’”⁶

There is one hymn text in *The Hymnal 1982* from the first of the Easter hymns. Ephrem wrote in Syriac, in his day the third most important Christian language in that region of the Middle East. The compilers wanted a way to include Ephrem. They asked the John Howard Winslow Rhys, a priest and then professor of New Testament at Sewanee, to make a literal translation of this hymn. They called on Francis Bland Tucker,⁷ then the retired rector of Christ Church, Savannah, to make the literal singable. *The Hymnal 1982 Companion* says, While Dr. Tucker made the modifications required for English rhythm, the sense of the stanzas was faithfully preserved.”⁸ Tucker himself wrote hymns, my favorite of his being, “All praise to thee, for thou, O King divine.”⁹ And he was

⁶ Ibid., 494.

⁷ *The Hymnal 1982 Companion*, ed. Raymond F. Glover (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1990), Vol. 2, s.v. Tucker, Francis Bland, 637–40.

⁸ Vol. 3 B, Hymn 443, page 835.

⁹ *The Hymnal 1982 according to the use of The Episcopal Church* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1985), Hymn 477.

a gifted translator of texts, notably the hymns, “Father, we thank thee who hast planted thy holy Name within our hearts”¹⁰ and “Alone thou goest forth, O Lord, in sacrifice to die.”¹¹

I’d like to conclude by reading the first words and the last verse of this hymn by Ephrem. It begins, “From God Christ’s deity came forth.” Now this is the last verse: Who then, my Lord, compares to you? The Watcher slept, the Great was small, the Pure baptized, the Life who died, the King abased to honor all: praised be your glory.”¹²

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

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¹⁰ Ibid., Hymn 302, 303.

¹¹ Ibid., Hymn 164.

¹² Ibid., Hymn 443.