

**Homily for Sergius, Abbot of Holy Trinity, Moscow, 1392,
and Lancelot Andrewes, Bishop of Winchester, 1626**

September 25, 2020

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Proper 20, Friday: Ecclesiastes 3:1–11; Psalm 144:1–4; Luke 9:18–22

Today we commemorate the lives and witness of Sergius, an esteemed Russian Orthodox abbot who died on this day in 1392, and Lancelot Andrewes, who died in 1626, and who was among the ablest and most influential of English theologians and preachers in his lifetime. Andrewes was a leading translator of the King James Version of the Bible. He served in important positions, among them dean of Westminster Abbey and later bishop of Westminster. T.S. Elliot famously adapted the beginning of Andrewes' sermon on the Visit of the Magi for his poem, "The Journey of the Magi." These are Andrewes' words from 1622:

It was no summer progress. A cold coming they had of it at this time of the year; just the worst time of the year, to take a journey, and especially a long journey in. The ways deep, the weather sharp, the days short, the sun farthest off, in . . . the very dead of winter.¹

¹ <https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/educational-magazines/journey-magi>, (accessed 25 September 2020).

But we did not hear the lessons appointed for this commemoration. Yesterday, today, and tomorrow are the only days in the church year when we have the option of having readings from Ecclesiastes at weekday Eucharists—so I decided to take it.

Yesterday we heard the famous beginning of this book, “Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity.”² Tomorrow’s reading begins, “Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth.”³

The first seven verses of today’s lesson are formally the first lines of poetry in Ecclesiastes. Robert Alter, in his translation of the Hebrew Bible, draws our attention to the pairings. The first six are “life and death for humans; planting and uprooting in the vegetable kingdom; then killing and healing, wrecking and building; weeping and laughing, mourning and dancing.”⁴ The last three are silence and speaking, loving and hating, and, finally, war and peace. In the end, everything is in God’s hands.

² Ecclesiastes 1:2.

³ Ecclesiastes 11:9.

⁴ Alter, 685 n.2.

At Nashotah House, I encountered the early form of the chasuble. Saint Mary's has two sets in this style. If you ever happen to see again, the 1964 movie Becket, in which Richard Burton had the role of Thomas Becket, this vestment style was still ordinary clothing in the late twelfth century for bishops.

These vestments at Nashotah were made by Valentine KilBride, a British weaver and a member of the Guild of St. Joseph and St. Dominic, a community of Roman Catholic artists and craftsmen in Sussex, England, founded in 1921. His daughter Jennie was a member and carried on the work of weaving and vestment making until the guild dissolved in 1989.

I never met Valentine's grandson and Jennie's nephew Ewan Clayton, a notable English calligrapher. He wrote this about the guild:

Simplicity, gentleness, peacefulness, domesticity and a kind of unsensational holiness, which is not about being heroic but is about living in a place that you love and learning to respect its rhythms and its plants and its animals and to love them and to go through season after season and the cycles of family life and to celebrate them as a community, in an ordinary way, where your spirituality is an ordinary spirituality rather than an extreme

*one . . . and where it is a given, a normal part of life, that you make things with your hands.*⁵

I am not an artist or a craftsman, but I think these words reflect the opportunity we have been given by the circumstances of God's gifts to each of us of life and faith.

At Ditchling, there was a stone inscribed with words from Ecclesiasticus in Latin and English:

Men rich in virtue, studying beautifulness, living in peace in their houses.⁶ A correct and legitimate translation is also as follows, "People rich in virtue, studying what is beautiful, living in peace in their dwellings." These words from the second century before the Christian Era are, I think, words of prayer appropriate for ourselves and our time.

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

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⁵ <http://www.john-price.me.uk/Guild/Intro.htm>, (accessed 25 September 2020).

⁶ Ecclesiasticus 44:6.