

**Homily for Thursday in the Twentieth Week after Pentecost  
October 22, 2020**

**By the Reverend Stephen Gerth**

*Year 2, Proper 24: Ephesians 3:14–21; Psalm 33:1–11; Luke 12:49–53*

In January 1981, I had an internship for six weeks at the parish where I would end up serving for two years after graduation from seminary, the Church of the Incarnation in Dallas. The 1928 Prayer Book was still in use at the main Sunday service. Holy Communion was celebrated on the first Sunday of the month. The other Sundays were Morning Prayer and Sermon.

Though the 1928 services were used at 11:15, the new three-year lectionary cycle was used for the readings at all three morning Sunday services. In the old Prayer Book, the reading of the gospel was followed by the creed. Announcements could then be made. Though not mentioned in the Prayer Book, a hymn would be sung. Then came the sermon.

The new Prayer Book restored the sermon to its historic place in Western worship, immediately after the gospel. Like other Protestants, many Episcopal ministers in the past had preached sermon series—some still do. The new book opened the door for the

preacher to link the words of the gospel lesson words to the ongoing life of his or her church community.

With the pandemic, I've found myself more and more wanting on weekdays to read and preach on the lessons appointed from the other books of the New Testament, about which I don't know that much. I just haven't done the same kind of study on the other books as I've done on the gospels.

Yesterday I started reading Raymond Brown's commentary on Ephesians from his *An Introduction to the New Testament*.<sup>1</sup> He begins with these words, "Among the Pauline writings only Romans can match Ephesians as a candidate for exercising the most influenced on Christian thought and spirituality."<sup>2</sup>

Over the years, I've learned at least to glance at every footnote in a Raymond Brown book. The very first footnote on the Letter to the Ephesians tells the reader that the best early manuscripts of this epistle begin, "To the saints who are faithful in Christ Jesus"—with no mention of Ephesus.<sup>3</sup> But the text

---

<sup>1</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 620–37.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 620.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 620, n1.

has been known traditionally as the Letter of Paul to the Ephesians. It was the sixteenth-century scholar and archbishop of the Anglican Church of Ireland, James Ussher, who suggested that this epistle was intended as a letter to be circulated widely, not just to an individual church.<sup>4</sup>

The Dutch priest and scholar Erasmus, who died in 1536, suggested that the writing style was not like that of other letters by Paul. Brown wrote that eighty percent of academic scholars regard the letter as coming from a disciple of Paul.<sup>5</sup>

Today's passage became important in helping the Christians of the first centuries sort through what we call Trinitarian language—how to speak about God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, and us with God and with each other. Paul gives us language to talk about Christ's presence and our union with him in this life through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

Unlike the undisputed letters of Paul, Ephesians does not emphasize Christ's second coming, but instead, the faithful have a mission from Christ: to unite all

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 627.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

people in Christ.<sup>6</sup> It's in Ephesians that we read, "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all."<sup>7</sup> In this letter, the challenges of Jewish Christians and Gentiles seem to be in the past.<sup>8</sup> Ephesians doesn't contemplate the rising of the divisions among Christians that will increase as the centuries pass. In Ephesians there is only a vision of unity.<sup>9</sup>

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

Copyright © 2020 The Society of the Free Church of St. Mary the Virgin, New York, New York.

All rights reserved.

---

<sup>6</sup> Joseph A. Grassi, "The Letter to the Ephesians," *The Jerome Biblical Commentary: Volume II: The New Testament*, Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy, eds. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc.), II:341–49.

<sup>7</sup> Ephesians 4:4–6.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 342.

<sup>9</sup> Brown, 620.