

Sermon for the 23rd Sunday of Pentecost Proper 26, Nov 4 2007 Yr B
Ecclesiasticus 2:1-11, Ephesians 1:11-23, Psalm 149, Luke 6:20 - 36
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The Book of Ecclesiasticus, or as it is also known as, The Wisdom of Jesus son of Sirach, begins with this well known statement: *Let us now sing the praises of famous men.*

The use of the word, “Ecclesiasticus,” suggests it was a “church book” in the early Christian Community that was later accepted it into the canon of Scripture. Sirach committed his wisdom to writing sometime before the Maccabean revolt in 180 BCE, probably in Jerusalem. His grandson translated it from the original Hebrew to Greek sometime after 132 BCE. For about 1500 years the Hebrew text was lost. Since the beginning of the year 1900 about two thirds of the original Hebrew have been discovered in fragments in Cairo, Qumran, and Masada.

In the Prologue, written by his grandson, the reader is warned about the problems of translation, something we need to still be aware of. He says:

You are therefore asked to read this book with good will and attention and to show indulgence in those places where, notwithstanding our efforts at interpretation, we may seem to have failed to give an adequate rendering of this or that expression; the fact is that there is no equivalent for things originally written in Hebrew when it is a question of translating them into another language; what is more, the Law itself, the Prophets and the other books differ considerably in translation from what appears in the original text.

Then, as now, translation from language to another can pose many problems not only in getting the proper language but also the proper sense of what is being said.

In some of the Greek texts, chapter forty- four of Ecclesiasticus is entitled, “A hymn in honor of the ancestors.” In this chapter he not only begins the praise of all the ancestors but also praises God for their gifts and talents. He begins with an acknowledgement of their gifts coming from God: *The Lord apportioned to them glory, great glory, his majesty from the beginning.* Then he began with those in the highest level *those who ruled in their kingdom and made a name for*

themselves in their bravery. Then he praised those who were intelligent and gave good advice. He praises those who became wealthy, those who became resourceful, those who composed musical tunes or put verses in writing. Some of these had even made a name for themselves and some were the pride of their time.

Unlike our western society that has a tendency to be mindful of only those who are supposedly larger than life, Jesus Ben Sirach, includes not only those who are well known but is sensitive to those whom no one will ever know they existed. He was sensitive to the fact that there were many individuals who were not known outside their own community but who had made a difference. And even some of these will be forgotten, as he says; *they have become as though they have never been born, they and their children after them.*

In the bible the word “saint,” in reference to living people, is used about 70 times and thirty of them are in the various letters of St. Paul. In his letter to the Romans, Paul begins with the words; *To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints.* Writing to the people in Philippi he begins: *To all the saints at Philippi.* In another letter he states: *All the saints send their greeting.*

The procedure, which the Roman Catholic Church uses to name, a saint, called canonization – a long drawn out procedure, has only operated since the tenth century. Prior to that, since the first century, saints were chosen by public acclaim. While this may have been fairer to the general public, it included information that was both legend or fictitious. Eventually the Vatican assumed the authority for approving saints.

In the Episcopal Church we have a book called Lesser Feasts and Fasts that includes many saints acknowledged by the wider Christian community. It also includes individuals who are celebrated by the Episcopal Church. One of the recent additions to this book was the name of Jonathan Myrick Daniels. Jonathan was born in 1939 in New Hampshire. For most of his life, beginning in high school, he wrestled with the meaning of life and death and vocation. His abilities attracted him to the fields of medicine, law, writing and ministry. He came close

to a loss of faith but had a profound conversion on Easter Sunday 1962 at the Church of the Advent in Boston. Shortly after that, at the age of twenty-three, he went to seminary. In March of 1965 he responded to the call of Dr Martin Luther King for people to come to Selma. He went, returned to seminary and obtained permission to return to work in Selma where he was sponsored by the Episcopal Society for Cultural and Racial unity. On August 14 he was jailed for joining a picket line and then, with three companions, was unexpectedly released. As they were walking down the street to a store they came across a 16 yr. old black girl, Ruby Sales, being threatened by a man with a gun. Jonathan pulled her to one side to shield her from the threats. He was shot in the back and killed by the blast of the 12-gauge shotgun. Later on it was discovered in his letters and papers the profound effect Selma had on him. He wrote "The doctrine of the creeds, the enacted faith of the sacraments, were the essential preconditions of the experience of life. The faith with which I went to Selma has not changed; it has grown...I began to know in my bones and sinews that I had been truly baptized into the Lord's death and resurrection....with them, the black men and white men, with all life, in him whose Name is above all the names that the races and nations shout...we are indelibly and unspeakably one."

As with any religion, the story of its success is really the story of its members who made it succeed. Christianity honors its greatest members by making them saints and does not hide their humanness. Sainthood begins at birth, is endorsed in the rite of Baptism, then the family create the atmosphere for living out that faith through reaching out to others, especially those in need. Participation in church and the sacraments deepens ones faith and leads us to an understanding that our Christian life is one lived for others not ourselves. The companions of Jonathan Daniels are no less saints than Jonathan but he was the one whose action caused his death. It was their commitment to their baptismal covenant, along with their understanding of the Eucharist, that give them the strength, the vision and the courage to do what they felt called to do in a

dangerous time that changed the world.

While Jonathan is now listed in the Lesser Feasts and Fasts as a recognized ‘saint’ his companions live on without recognition. Yet, their action will not be forgotten by Ruby Sales or her family.

While many will give their life, many will leave home and travel to foreign lands, many will make a difference on the national or state level, the reality is that every day there are those who will never be recognized for living out their baptismal covenant; for making the Eucharist a living reality; for making God a real presence in the world around them. It is the simplicity that makes a difference on the street when we “give a cup of water in the name of Christ.”

Saints are not perfect. When the family of Phillips Brooks objected to their uncle being placed in the Book of Lesser Feasts and Fasts, one of them reported about how difficult he was to live with. One response to them was “you are lucky you were not related to St Paul.” The family of St. Brigit in Ireland found her love for the poor extremely annoying because she gave just about everything she could belonging to family members to the poor.

Saints come in all shapes and sizes and commitments to God at all levels. I sing a song of the saints of God, one was a doctor and one was a queen, one was shepherdess on the green...One was a soldier, one was a priest and one was slain by a fierce wild beast...You can meet them in school, or in lanes or at sea, in church or in trains or in shops or at tea, for the saints of God are just folks like me and I mean to be one too.