
Not Too Hard for Us

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith
Proper 10 – Year C

I want to share with you two comments that bear on our scriptures for today. One is from a child you've never heard of. The other is from a much older man we know and love, the writer Mark Twain. The child's comment is short and naïve, the kind of thing a child has heard from people around her. She learned to repeat it because it's such a cool thing to say. The Mark Twain comment is also something people often say. In fact you've probably heard me say it because it's often quoted by preachers.

Here's the child's comment. A friend of mine was trying to explain something to the child as her godmother. She was a little girl, about 7 years old. Like many girls her age she was as smart as she could be, full of confidence, completely self-assured. As my friend was in the middle of explaining the situation to this smart 7-year-old, the girl suddenly got impatient and interrupted her to say, "I been knowing that!" That's right: all of 7 years old, and she's "been knowing" so many things that she doesn't need to be told anymore. That's a smart child for you!

And that's the point of the Old Testament lesson, appointed for today in our Roman Catholic lectionary [not our Cathedral lectionary for today). It's from Deuteronomy, and it features Moses saying to his people:

This commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away.

It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?"

Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?"

No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to carry it out. (Deut. 30:11-14)

It's 'not too hard for you!' Moses assures his people. It's as if he's taking the attitude of my friend's godchild impatiently saying, 'Y'all been knowing that! I don't need to tell you more. It's not that hard. You got this!' That's right; with complete confidence and assurance Moses is saying too, 'You can handle this. The commandment is in your grasp. It's not too high or too low, but very near: in your mouth and in your heart for you to do it; to carry it out.'

That takes us directly to my second comment on the scriptures appointed for today. It's that famous Mark Twain comment on commandments in the Bible that you've likely heard from me and many other preachers.

It ain't the things in the Bible I don't understand that bother me.

It's the things in the Bible I *do* understand that bother me.

Now that's especially true in our New Testament scriptures, where our Lord Jesus keeps simplifying all the 500 or more laws of Moses down to the two straightforward commandments that we hear again in today's gospel reading: Love God and your neighbor as yourself. Of course, like the lawyer in today's gospel I may proceed to complicate things—as Mark Twain said, because 'the things in the Bible that bother me I don't want to understand.' But that's my choice, right? My will and my desires may lead me to resist the scriptures, but not because I don't understand; rather because I understand all too

well what is required of me according to the commandment.

That takes us to the remaining scriptures appointed for today, our Psalm 82, and our Epistle, and even our Collect. Let's focus on the Epistle first. St. Paul writes to the Colossians:

You have heard of this hope before [laid up for you in heaven] in the word of the truth, the gospel that has come to you. Just as it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God . . .

For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God.

May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. (Col. 1:5-6, 9-14)

Well, as we like to say in the evangelical churches, 'There's nothing left to do but the shouting!' Halleluiah! 'We've been rescued from the power of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of God's beloved Son in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.' And the gospel parable that Jesus tells gives us a promise of that redemption. Imagine that each of us, have in some way been treated like 'the man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and have fallen into the hands of other people in some way, or who have stripped us in some way, and or who have beat us in some way, or who have gone away, leaving us half dead in some way.'

What would it take for us in such situations, who yearn to be 'rescued from the power of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of God's beloved Son, and experience 'redemption, even the forgiveness of our own sins against others and even the forgiveness of their sins against us?' Halleluiah! What would 'enable to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light?'

Well, as your preacher appointed for today, I'm here to tell you: It's 'not too hard for you, nor is it too far away,' for you to 'share in such an inheritance.' Rather, 'it is very near to us; it is in our mouths and in your hearts for you to have this.' All we need to do, friends of Christ, is to *be* a neighbor to others who have 'in some way been treated like the man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and who have fallen into the hands of other people in some way; to *be* a neighbor to those who have been stripped in some way, or *be* a neighbor to those who have beaten in some way, or who have had others go away from them, or leaving them half dead in some way.'

That's right, all we need do, to achieve such a transference into the kingdom of light, and dwell there among the beloved saints, is to be one of them ourselves. Go therefore, if you are a follower of Jesus, or even only a friend of Christ, and find people—just one at a time—who need rescue in some way, like the man in today's gospel, and be that Good Samaritan yourself. 'No,' as Moses said, 'It's not too hard for you to do this, but it is available to you in your mouth and in your heart,' if only we would will and desire to do it and carry it out.'

A final illustration comes to us from the famous missionary doctor, David Livingston. This was the Dr. Livingston who gave his career to a mission of medical intervention in Southern and Central Africa in the mid-nineteenth century. Consider his protest that he did not do something so hard, despite his legendary reputation as an explorer and slave trade abolitionist.

People talk of the sacrifice I have made in spending so much of my life in Africa. . . . Is that a sacrifice which brings its own blest reward in healthful activity, the consciousness of doing good, peace of mind, and a bright hope of a glorious destiny hereafter? Away with the word in such a view, and with such a thought! It is emphatically no sacrifice. Say rather it is a privilege. Anxiety, sickness, suffering, or danger, now and then, with a foregoing of the common conveniences and charities of this life, may make us pause, and cause the spirit to waver, and the soul to sink; but let this only be for a moment. All these are nothing when compared with the glory which shall be revealed in and for us. I never made a sacrifice.

“Perspectives on the World Christian Movement,” delivered to students at Cambridge University on December 4, 1857^[1]

He “never made a sacrifice,” Livingston declared. Yet he also spent his life, like a Good Samaritan, following these verses from our Psalm appointed for today:

Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute.

Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked. (Ps. 82: 3-4)

Following Jesus, therefore, let us strengthen our resolve to go and do likewise. As a prayer for such strength, we have ready at hand our Collect appointed for today. Let us pray, as the Collect says:

O Lord, mercifully receive the prayers of your people who call upon you, and grant that they may know and understand what things they ought to do, and also may have grace and power faithfully to accomplish them; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

[1] Acknowledgement: John Piper, 'Desiring God' at <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/our-grand-obligation>. Plus: "Dr Livingstone's Cambridge lectures : together with a prefatory letter by the Rev. Professor Sedgwick" Lecture I: Commerce and Christianity, p. 23: https://archive.org/stream/drlivingstonesca00livi/drlivingstonesca00livi_djvu.txt. For salient video documentaries of Livingston's life and mission see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oJ6V1qXbc2Y#action=share> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P5jbedFErD4>