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## Daily Meditations

### October 26 - 31, 2020

*The Biblical readings are taken from the Daily Office in the Book of Common Prayer for Year 2 and written by the St. Stephen's Meditation Writing Team: Dave Boyd, Becky Denton, Pat Gillory, Traci Maxwell, Jay Nickel, Bob Reed, T.Cay Rowe, and Carroll Wilson.*

*Click on the scripture reading for each day to go directly to link.*

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## COLLECT, PROPER 25

*Almighty and everlasting God, increase in us the gifts of faith, hope, and charity; and, that we may obtain what you promise, make us love what you command; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.*

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## Of Dubious Origin

Monday, October 26, 2020

### Ecclesiasticus 19:4-17

*One who rejoices in wickedness will be condemned,  
but one who hates gossip has less evil. - Ecclesiasticus 19:5*

The readings this week come from Ecclesiasticus (a.k.a. Sirach), one of the books of the Apocrypha. The word apocryphal means: of dubious origin. Many Protestant denominations do not recognize the books of Apocrypha. The books of the Apocrypha are not included in the TANAKH, the Jewish Bible of today, but were included in the Septuagint, a Greek translation of Hebrew Scriptures with which the authors of the New Testament Gospels and Epistles were familiar. In our Anglican *Articles of Religion*, the Church is to read these books "for example of life and instruction of manners; but yet doth it not apply them to establish any doctrine" (BCP, p. 868).

Today's reading instructs us about gossip. Don't listen to it. Don't believe it. Don't spread it. As a manager, occasionally a staff member would come to me with a recommendation that I do something differently. The recommendation would sometimes be prefaced with the words "some people feel like..." My answer was always along the lines of "I can't deal with *some people*. You can let them know they need to bring their complaint to me directly." Or else, "I can't respond to some people but, what do *you* think?" If someone starts a conversation with "Don't tell anybody, but ..." I try to stop them with words like "I'll need you to trust me to decide what if anything to share." My organization didn't have a very big problem with gossip.

Jesus (the Christ) instructs us to deal directly and privately with a person who has wronged us (Matthew 18:15) before we involve any other parties. Jesus teaches plain straight talk: to let my 'yes' mean yes and my 'no' mean no (Matthew 5:37). Jesus ben Sirach (author of today's readings) gives similar pithy advice.

When I lead groups and teach them how to keep confidentiality, I give the instructions "outside of this group (and in it) tell only your own story, not anyone else's." When we practice this, we grow in personal power. We speak only when we have something of our own to say. We consciously protect the dignity and privacy of our fellow human beings (friends, family, neighbors, colleagues and enemies). We find, when tempted to tell another's story, we have to think and figure out why that story is important to us, and then figure out how to talk about what's important by telling our own story instead of someone else's.

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## The Third Department of Knowledge

Tuesday, October 27, 2020

### Ecclesiasticus 24:1-12

The Jewish Bible is referred to by the abbreviation TANAKH and is made up of the Torah (the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures), the Nevi'im (the Prophets), and the Kethumvim (the Writings, including Psalms, Proverbs, Job, etc.). Ecclesiasticus is self-consciously written in the tradition of Wisdom literature like Proverbs. Alongside the Law and the Prophets, Wisdom is the third department of knowledge for the ancient Hebrews. "Wisdom seeks by observation, experience, and reflection to know things in their essence and reality as they stand related to man and God."<sup>1</sup> Through observation of the created order, our history and personal experience, guided by the gift from God of insight and wisdom, we gain some knowledge of the nature of God and our relationship with God.

A storyteller whom I love deeply quotes "Sometimes fiction is truer than truth." Likewise, sometimes (often) poetry expresses a deeper reality. Some of the most moving creation poetry for me comes from John:

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.* NRSV, John 1:1-5

Or from Psalm 8:

*When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,  
the moon and the stars that you have established;  
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,  
mortals that you care for them?* NRSV

Or when I contemplate the miracle of a leaf – a factory that consumes carbon and releases oxygen, that uses the power of sunlight to create sugars and nutrients for the tree, that springs forth from the branch as if from nothing, and with time falls and decomposes into humus on the ground to feed others – I am awed by the organization and design.

Through the personified mouth of Wisdom in today's reading, Wisdom identifies herself as that organizing, design principle of creation from which all of creation and all of Israel's history gives evidence to.

How do you see evidence of God's direction in your life?

[1] Gehman, H. (1970). *The New Westminster Dictionary of the Bible*. Westminster Press, Philadelphia, (p. 1002)

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## Trust and Positive Energy

Wednesday, October 28, 2020

### **Ecclesiasticus 28:14-26**

*The blow of a whip raises a welt,  
but a blow of the tongue crushes the bones.  
Many have fallen by the edge of the sword,  
but not as many as have fallen because of the tongue. - Ecclesiasticus 28:18-19*

To tell a lie about someone with the deliberate intention to hurt them seems so outrageous that I have trouble imagining it outside of the context of adolescent cruelty as portrayed in movies like "Mean Girls." It is so egregious that an admonition against it made it into the Ten Commandments: "Do not bear false witness against your neighbor" (Exodus 20:16). Even in what seems like a pervasive cynicism of our age, our world could not function without a high degree of trust. When I hand the clerk a \$5 bill to pay for my hamburger, we both tacitly agree and trust that the piece of paper with green ink and a picture of President Lincoln represents some kind of real value that we can exchange. When I drive down the road and the light turns red, I trust that the other drivers will behave similarly and slow to a stop, that they will stay on the left side of the road, and that they will be watching and responding to other dangers. If we can't depend on these kinds of simple assumptions, we couldn't function in society at all.

Trust is a very fragile commodity. It is hard to earn and easy to lose. We have a great deal of destructive power at our disposal by choosing to be untrustworthy or even cruel with our words and our behavior. Conversely, we can choose to be conscious of and grateful for our connection in the world and put positive energy into our relationships and institutions. On my better days, I choose the later.

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## Learning Table Manners

Thursday, October 29, 2020

### **Ecclesiasticus 31:12-18, 31:25-32:2**

*Judge your neighbor's feelings by your own, and in every matter be thoughtful. - NRSV, Ecclesiasticus 31:15*

When my daughters were in elementary and middle school, the women in my household decided it was time I improved my table manners. The matter of highest emotional weight was the fact that my elbows would find their way onto the table sometimes. I felt like I was being attacked for some arbitrary rule that somebody had made up and if I failed to follow it, I was accused of being disrespectful and selfish. In self-defense, I went to the library and reviewed several etiquette books to get to the heart of the matter. The answers I found were nuanced: One elbow is okay but not both and not if the arm with the elbow is holding food. The writers also averred that the rule was not very important and much less egregious a violation that failure to wipe your lips before drinking from your glass.

Any argument about manners and etiquette probably comes down to whether the person imposing the rule is "putting on airs" and whether the violator will put others before himself/herself. In my better days, I vote for putting others first.

The guidelines presented in today's reading by the author, Jesus ben Sirach, seem so straight forward and obvious, but I remember, pre-Covid, that I would occasionally at the Parish Hall spread after church each Sunday reach for a couple of the best morsels when one should be sufficient. Paul rebuked some of his community for being gluttonous at the worship meals (1 Cor:11). It seems we often do need to attend to our motives and our behavior.

Lord, help me to keep the needs and desires of others first in my mind and in my heart. Amen.

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## **The More Becoming Virtues**

*Friday, October 30, 2020*

### **Ecclesiasticus 34:1-8, 18-22**

*"As one who catches at a shadow and pursues the wind, so is anyone who believes in dreams." - NRSV, Ecclesiasticus 34:2*

I have spent time paying attention to my dreams. I have recorded them in my journal, I have dialogued with the characters in my dreams (again through my journal), and I have gained insight into parts of myself that I have been neglecting and learned to honor those parts more. So it is jarring to read such a bald denunciation of dreams to today's scripture.

I do not believe dreams predict the future (although they may bring to consciousness things we unconsciously anticipate). I believe that the author of today's reading is condemning the various occult practices of trying to predict and control the future, whether through dreams or divination of signs and omens, be they dreams, entrails of sacrificial animals, the configuration of birds in flight, the lines on the palm of the hands. I believe that these activities are attempts to control the universe by knowing the future. That is to act out of pride and arrogance instead of the more becoming virtues of humility and gratitude.

In all practices, whether interpreting dreams or making prayers, or eating or exercising, I suggest the test of discernment for the rightness (righteousness) of the activity is to ask: Does this lead me into closer, more grateful, more loving connection with God, myself, my neighbor and creation. If not, maybe I should abandon it. Or as the author, Jesus ben Sirach might say it, since the eyes of the Lord are on those who love him, is this activity done in the love of God? If not, maybe we should abandon it.

Lord, help me to order my life in all ways in the love of you. Amen

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## **When I Consider...**

*Saturday, October 31, 2020*

### **Ecclesiasticus 35:1-17**

*Be generous when you worship the Lord,  
and do not stint the first fruits of your hands.  
With every gift show a cheerful face,*

*and dedicate your tithe with gladness. (Ecclus. 35:10-11)*

When I consider the wonders of the heavens and earth,  
of all there is in all creation;  
When I consider my humble in miniscule place in the universe;  
When I consider the reality that the God of creation,  
in whom I and all creation live and move and have our being;  
When I consider that God knows and loves me;  
When I consider I am allowed to be in relation with the Divine;  
How can I respond but with awe, gratitude and worship?  
Amen

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