

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
2/12/2023

Ecclesiasticus 15:15-20

There is a story the Philosopher Plato presents in Book 7 of his masterpiece book known as "The Republic." The main character of the book, who is none other than Socrates, Plato's own teacher, is having a conversation with Plato's brother (Glaucou) about the founding of the ideal state. Socrates asks his pupil to imagine a cave inhabited by prisoners who have been chained in place since they were little children. Their arms, legs and heads are fixed, held in place, and they are forced to gaze at a wall in front of them. Behind them is an enormous fire, and between the fire and the prisoners is a raised walkway. People walk on the walkway carrying all sorts of things on their backs, their heads, their hands. The prisoners watch the shadows cast by the men, not knowing they are shadows. They can also hear echoes of conversations and noises behind them produced by the people on the walkway. Socrates suggests that since the shadows and the noise echoes are all the prisoners have ever seen since childhood, they believe these shadows and echoes to be real and not just the reflections of reality. They would soon begin to describe each shadow and would praise those who could anticipate the next shadow. These shadows and echoes would become their entire life, and their whole society would depend on the shadows on the wall.

Now, imagine that a prisoner is forced out of the cave. At first the light would hurt his eyes and he would feel totally disoriented and lost. After adjusting to the light, however, the man would come to understand that the Sun is the "source of the seasons and the years, and is the steward of all things in the visible place, and is in a certain way the cause of all those things he and his companions had been seeing" (516b-c). Certainly, this person would soon realize that his whole understanding of the world is based on shadows and not on reality. He also would realize that he could never return to his former world. He would not be able to play the game of shadows, because he now knows that there are no men with gigantic heads, but rather men carrying baskets on their heads. There are no men with monstrous humps on their backs, but rather men carrying sacks of flour on their backs. There are no women with square bellies, but rather women with square canisters for harvest hanging from their necks and resting on the mid-section of their bodies. He would know that once you see the sun you can never go back to a life of shadows, unless you choose to live your life according to a lie.

I have taken a risk today by preaching from the Apocryphal book of Sirach, also known as Ecclesiasticus, or The Wisdom of Ben Sira. You may remember that the Apocrypha is that group of books which appear in the Roman Catholic Bible, but don't appear in many Protestant Bibles. In the Anglican Tradition those books are considered to be worthy of study for "examples of life and instruction on manners, but not for the

establishment of Doctrine” (Article 6 of the 39 Articles.) In either case, here I go. I promise you it will not be the last time heresy is preached from this pulpit!

Our passage from Ecclesiasticus today comes from chapter 15. From Chapter 14:20 until now, Ben Sira has been talking about the happiness that seeking wisdom produces. Now at chapter 15:11 he begins a new thought known as “The Freedom of Choice.” The first four verses read as follow, “Do not say, ‘It was the Lord’s doing that I fell away’; for he does not do what he hates. Do not say, ‘It was he who led me astray’; for he has no need of the sinful. The Lord hates all abominations; such things are not loved by those who fear him. It was he who created humankind in the beginning, and he left them in the power of their own free choice.”

In other words, don’t say, “I have no choice but to sin, God made me weak; he made me a slave of my evil inclinations, I can’t resist evil; the Devil is just too powerful for me, the Devil made me do it.” Don’t say you have no choice! You were not created in a Cave. You were not created to be in chains, looking at nothing but shadows on a blank wall. You were created for freedom, by the one who created humanity from the beginning of creation. The first verse in our passage today follows, “If you choose, you can keep the commandments, and to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice.”

Ben Sira, like Plato, has a high view of humanity. They both believe that it is possible for human beings to come out of the cave through the pursuit of wisdom or through obedience to God (Sirah calls it “The Fear of the Lord.”) Both authors believe that humanity has the ability to lead ethical lives, to conquer their evil inclinations, to improve their standing before God, to achieve an elevated morality. For Plato this is possible because humans are endowed with reason. For Ben Sira this is possible because humans were left by their creator with the power of their Free Will. They have the ability to choose. There are two paths set before us, a path of fire and a path of water, a path of life and a path of death. It is up to us to choose.

I agree with Ben Sira that God has left us with the freedom of choice. God has given us free will. But I don’t agree that we are capable of coming out of the cave by use of our free will. Coming out of the cave requires a total renunciation of everything we have ever known, and I don’t know if humanity is able to do this without help. We advance two steps or even three, but for every step forward we often take two steps back. Look at the whole history of the nation of Israel. Was there a time in their history when they were able to be 100% obedient to God? The answer is a resounding “NO”. Look at our own history. Has there ever been a 24-hour period in your life when you were 100% obedient to God? Just one day when you were sinless, blameless, able to come face to face with the radiant light of the sun?

Yes, God gave us free will, but the truth of the matter is that we use that free will to dig deeper and deeper into the cave and not to get out. The apostle Paul said it well in

Romans when he said that even though he often desired to do good, it was the evil he did not want to do, which he often ended up doing. This is the human condition! Yes, we have freedom, but we use that freedom for our own damnation! The good news for us today, and for Sirach as well, is that we don't have to dig ourselves out of the cave. Jesus Christ entered the cave for us. His explosive resurrection tore open the walls of that cave! We can now have unimpeded access to the light. The cave has been obliterated, destroyed, blown to pieces. We are now free! No longer slaves of our evil inclinations, because with Christ in our hearts all is possible.

Can we be better people? Only in Him, with Him, and through Him. Can we come out of the cave? Only in Him, with Him, and through Him. Can we choose to follow God's commandments? Only in Him, with Him, and through Him. He has conquered all for us! Now our walk of faith is not meant to get us out of the Cave, to secure our salvation, or to get us to the "other side." Our walk of faith does not produce or lead to salvation, but rather it is the result of our salvation. Ben Sira was partly right. The event of Jesus Christ's resurrection would have made his statements 100% truthful. If he had known Christ, he might have said, "If you choose Christ, you can keep the commandments, and to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice in Him. You can keep the commandments because if you choose him, he will do it for you, he will destroy the isolation and separation the cave produces. He can give you freedom!"

My friends, the sad reality is that even though many of us have seen the light and know Christ to be the only one who can destroy the darkness, loneliness, isolation, and pain of our own caves, many of us still choose a world of shadows and unreality. The sad news is that many of our brothers and sisters are slaves in their own caves. Now, to be perfectly honest, they are very nice caves. I have seen them. They are equipped with shiny, beautiful objects. Some of them even have three or four cars in their driveways. Those are really nice caves. But they are caves nonetheless! And the inhabitants inside them are slaves. Bound by their own isolation, depression, lack of relevance, and lack of purpose. They don't realize the unreality of their own lives, but they live in a world of shadows! Who will go to them and tell them about Christ, the only source of light? Who will go and tell them they no longer have to live in shadows?

This is where you and I come in. It is up to us to reach out and cast a spotlight on Christ. We who have known freedom have a responsibility to those in captivity. I pray today that we will choose the light and that we may reflect that light through the quality of our lives and how we show up in the world. Christ is the source of all light. Only in him can there be freedom, and without him all we have is shadows. Amen!