

HEARERS OF THE WORD

Sirach 27:4-7; Ps 92 (91); 1 Corinthians 15:54-58; Luke 6:39-45

The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good

Luke 6:39 Jesus also told them a parable: “Can a blind person guide a blind person? Will not both fall into a pit? 40 A disciple is not above the teacher, but everyone who is fully qualified will be like the teacher. 41 Why do you see the speck in your neighbour’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? 42 Or how can you say to your neighbour, ‘Friend, let me take out the speck in your eye,’ when you yourself do not see the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbour’s eye.

Luke 6:43 “No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; 44 for each tree is known by its own fruit. Figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. 45 The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks.”

Luke 6:46 “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I tell you? 47 I will show you what someone is like who comes to me, hears my words, and acts on them. 48 That one is like a man building a house, who dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock; when a flood arose, the river burst against that house but could not shake it, because it had been well built. 49 But the one who hears and does not act is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the river burst against it, immediately it fell, and great was the ruin of that house.”

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The images used here have become part of the popular memory of Jesus’ teaching. These few verses do take us to the heart of the matter.

KIND OF WRITING

Our Gospel comes from the third sec-



tion of Luke’s *Sermon on the Plain* (6:17-49). Luke structures the sermon in three parts as follows: Luke 6:20-26 (6C), vv. 27-38 (7C) and vv. 39-49 (8C; the excerpt is vv. 39-45). Each section is indicated by Luke (vv. 20a, 27a and 39a). To complete the picture, the concluding verses have been added above.

The omitted verses function has a conclusion to the whole Sermon on the Plain, much the same way as the Sermon on the Mount ends in Matthew 7.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

Testing the heart

I the LORD test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings. (Jer 17:10)

But I will punish you as your deeds deserve,’ says the LORD. ‘I will set fire to your palace; it will burn up everything around it.’” (Jer 21:14)

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

Hypocrite/hypocrisy in Luke

Meanwhile, when the crowd gathered by the thousands, so that they trampled on one another, he began to speak first to his disciples, “Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees, that is, their hypocrisy. (Luke 12:1)

Thought for the day

For many, it is seemingly possible to sleep-walk through life, to live on an entirely sentient level. Perhaps our current culture of distraction supports such superficial so-called living. Many, however, are dissatisfied and long for an awakening, a conversion, a transformation, for something more. Such a hunger of the heart is acknowledged in many religions and philosophies — Jesus’ teaching here could just as easily be on the lips of the Gautama Buddha. The difference for Christians is the grace of God in Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Ultimately, it is all grace, grace upon grace as the Prologue of John puts it.

Prayer

God of all our awakenings, we know that the journey inward is the journey home. Keep our hearts restless until we come to rest in you. Amen.

You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time? (Luke 12:56)

But the Lord answered him and said, “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? (Luke 13:15)

Trees and fruit

Can a fig tree produce olives, my brothers and sisters, or a vine produce figs? Neither can a salt water spring produce fresh water. (Jas 3:12)

Ignatius, Letter to the Ephesians

None of these things escapes your notice, if you have perfect faith and love toward Jesus Christ. For these are the beginning and the end of life: faith is the beginning and love is the end, and the two, when they exist in unity, are God. Everything else that contributes to excellence follows from them. No one professing faith sins, nor does anyone possessing love hate. The tree is known by its fruit; thus those who profess to be Christ’s will be recognised by their actions. For the

work is a matter not of what one promises now, but of persevering to the end in the power of faith. (Eph 14:1-2)

ST PAUL

Therefore I exhort you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a sacrifice—alive, holy, and pleasing to God—which is your reasonable service. Do not be conformed to this present world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may test and approve what is the will of God—what is good and well-pleasing and perfect. (Romans 12:1-2)

And we all, with unveiled faces reflecting the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another, which is from the Lord, who is the Spirit. (2 Corinthians 3:18)

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Now those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also behave in accordance with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, being jealous of one another. (Galatians 5:22-26)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 39 A link with the previous section is clear: no judging. Luke signals the start of the final section with a heading about Jesus telling a parable. It is likely that Luke has at least all three illustrations in mind. (Indeed, parabolic material continues until v. 49.) In Greek, the first question is formatted to trigger the answer “of course not”, while the second question is laid out to trigger the answer “obviously.” The image of the blind leading etc. is found in the culture. Cf. Philo of Alexandria’s less pity version: *But if any persons, utterly disregarding the true wealth of nature, pursue instead the riches of vain opinions, relying on those riches which are blind instead of on those which are gifted with acute sight, and taking a guide for their road who is himself crippled, such men must of necessity fall down.* (Virt 1:7) The imagery resonates with Jesus’ programme of recovery of sight to the blind: 4:18; 7:21-22; 18:35-43; cf. 14:13, 21. Philip, in the story of the Ethiopian eunuch, is the ideal, clear-sighted teacher who can help the blind (Acts 8:31).

Verse 40 Similar thoughts can be found elsewhere. For Luke, Jesus is *the* teacher

and cannot be surpassed. Nevertheless, Luke inserts an adjective “fully qualified” (*katērtismenos*). The emphasis is not so much on matching the teacher’s knowledge but rather on the formation and development of the disciple’s moral imagination. The adjective also connotes being restored to a former state of excellence. This accords well with the next example of the speck.

Verses 41-42 The illustrations here are borne by two rhetorical questions which require no answer. There must be some humour in the outlandish contrast between speck and a log! Again, the emphasis falls on the training and formation of the true disciple, attending to his/her own faults first of all. This is not a general educational or psychological principle; rather, Luke has in mind that the guidance needed is to be found precisely in the teaching of Jesus, the teaching *par excellence*. The new “seeing” involved takes in a range of reactions and realities such as perceptions, disposition of the heart and intentions of the mind. As Luke Timothy Johnson puts it: “character precedes action.” Who you are will determine what you do. In the interests of inclusive language, the NRSV uses the word “friend” here but the original has the word “brother” or “sister.” The Jerusalem Bible is more faithful here because Luke has in mind members of the one faith community.

The use of the word “hypocrite” elsewhere in Luke is instructive (see above). The root meaning of hypocrite is an actor, one who wears a mask.

Verse 43 The move from the carpenter’s shop to the farmer’s orchard is facilitated by a play of sounds in Greek: speck is *karphos* in Greek, while fruit is *karpos*. The illustration of the tree/fruit underlines the earlier observation about character preceding action. The whole point of the Sermon is to shape the inner person so that s/he may bear good fruit. Unlike the decorations on a Christmas tree, the fruits of the Christian life must grow from within.

Verse 44 Again, the outlandish contrasts seem to imply a smile. The argument has moved from *quality* of fruit to *kind* of fruit.

Verse 45 Each person has a treasure within; what lies in that treasure becomes apparent in the way s/he acts.

Verse 46-49 The common image of the two ways concludes the Sermon on the Plain. Compare Psalm 1 or *The Di-*

dache 1:1-6. The influential Letter of Barnabas puts it like this: *There are two ways of teaching and power, one of light and one of darkness, and there is a great difference between these two ways.* (Barn 18:1) The contrast of rock and sand may originally have referred to flash floods in the many wadis which lead down to the Jordan. It is more than evidently foolish to build your house on a dry river bed!!

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Can you remember an occasion when you were giving out about the behaviour of another person, and later realised you had some of the same fault yourself? Was that a wake-up call for you? Jesus tells us it is more constructive to correct our own faults, than complain about the faults of others.

2. If we want to help other people we need to have our feet on the ground, with a realistic awareness of our gifts and our limitations. Otherwise we will be impractical, like the blind leading the blind. What has helped you to be realistic about what you can and cannot do?

3. “No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit.” This parable invites us to examine the motivation behind what we do. If our basic motivation is love, then our lives will bear good fruit. If love is absent from our lives then the fruits will be conflict, disharmony and abuse of people for our own selfish ends.

PRAYER

O God, our teacher and judge, hear our prayer as we gather at the table of your word.

Enrich our hearts with the goodness of your wisdom and renew us from within, that all our actions, all our words, may bear the fruit of your transforming grace.

We make our prayer through your Son, Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, for ever and ever. Amen.



Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!

1 Cor 15:50 *Now this is what I am saying, brothers and sisters: Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.* 51 *Listen, I will tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—* 52 *in a moment, in the blinking of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.* 53 *For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality.* 54 *Now when this perishable puts on the imperishable, and this mortal puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will happen,*

“Death has been swallowed up in victory.” 55 “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?”

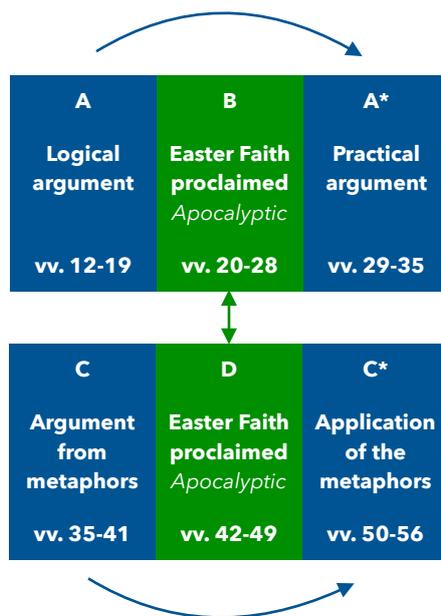
56 The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. 57 But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ! 58 So then, dear brothers and sisters, be firm. Do not be moved! Always be outstanding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord. .

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Nothing is more central to Pauline teaching than the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, a resurrection which includes ours as well, as a kind of first fruits. The lectionary tends to privilege brevity (perhaps a good thing!) but the verses chosen for today make little sense independently of the omitted opening verses 50-53.

KIND OF WRITING

The structure in colour can help us see what is happening here. Vv. 50-56 (C*) in some way correspond to vv. 35-41 (C). V. 55 brings that argument to an emotional conclusion by means of an exclamation. The final v. 56 furnishes a very brief peroration or synthesis, taking us back to the very start of the discussion in v. 1: *Now I want to make clear for you, brothers and sisters, the gospel that I preached to you, that you received and on which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.* (1 Cor 15:1-2) Finally, although Paul has argument logically in A, A* and C, and inserted apocalyptic reflections in B and D, nevertheless, the final application of the teaching and insights is presented once more in the



language of apocalyptic. In other words, Paul is using the language of faith to describe faith.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

At this point, Paul arrives at the climax of his persuasion. He had first argued logically: to say there is no resurrection *at all* would undercut the whole Gospel project. Then, he argued metaphorically to show that “body” can mean more than one thing and he even spoke of a spiritual body. Having thus opened up their minds, he applied these insights to the concrete case of how we are to imagine the dead rising. This is of its nature beyond description—but Paul has a shot at it before giving up (“I will tell you a mystery”).

RELATED PASSAGES

For we know that if our earthly house, the tent we live in, is dismantled, we have a building from God, a house not built by human hands, that is eternal in the heavens. For in this earthly house we groan, because we desire to put on our heavenly dwelling, if indeed, after we have put on our heavenly house, we will not be found naked. For we groan while we are in this tent, since we are weighed down, because we do not want to be unclothed, but clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. (2 Cor 5:1-4)

For we tell you this by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will surely

not go ahead of those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a shout of command, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be suddenly caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will always be with the Lord. (1 Thess 4:15-17)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 50 Paul is not contrasting the material and the spiritual but rather saying that our whole being will be transformed. The dead are still, somehow, embodied.

Verse 51 Mystery suggests some kind of revelation (lit. apocalypse). Sleep means to die. As in 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul thinks some will be still alive when the Lord returns.

Verse 52 The language returns to pure apocalyptic because Paul continues to make faith claims rather than rational arguments.

Verse 53 Notice “puts on” rather that is replaced by.

Verse 54-55 Paul allows himself a cry of triumph, using allusions to Isaiah 25:8 (LXX) and Hosea 13:14.

Verse 56 “Sting” comes from Hosea 13:14. The writing is compressed: sin communicated death and, worse, sin had been able to manipulate of the Torah (NB: Rom 5:12-21; 7:7-25). Salvation in Christ liberates us from the power of all three: sin, death and the Law.

Verse 57 An emotional concluding exclamation.

Verse 58 A final appeal which takes us back to the opening verses as well as to the logical argument in vv. 12-19.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The great transformation to come has already begun for us — how do I see it unfolding in my own life?
2. Do I feel the same sense of exultant gratitude, so much part of Paul’s spirituality?

PRAYER

God of the living: for you, all are alive and so we place our faith in Jesus, the first born from the dead, the ground of our hope and the pledge of future life.

Its fruit brings to light a tree's cultivation— so reasoning notions of a person's heart

Sir 27:4 With a shaking of a sieve, refuse remains—
 so a person's offal (*skubala*) in his reasoning (*logismos*).
 5 A kiln tests a potter's vessels,
 and a person's test is in his deliberation (*dialogismos*).
 6 Its fruit brings to light a tree's cultivation—
 so reasoning (*logismos*) notions of a person's heart.
 7 Before reasoning (*logismos*) do not commend a man,
 for this is the test of people.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Jesus' own wisdom is to be found in the Gospel reading and so it is appropriate that the first reading should come from wider tradition of biblical wisdom. The imagery of the tree/fruits is not the only link between them: both try to show that the inner person comes out in one's actions.

KIND OF WRITING

Our reading is wisdom, written in the form of biblical parallelism. In Sir 26:28-27:21, the writer deals with "hazards to friendship and integrity," as follows:

- 26:28 A numerical proverb
- 26:29-27:3 Commerce
- 27:4-7** Criteria for assessing people
- 27:8-10 Righteousness
- 27:11-15 Speech (cf. vv. 4-7)
- 27:16-21 Breaking confidence

ORIGIN OF THE READING

The reading comes from one of the wisdom books of the Bible, Ecclesiasticus or Sirach or the Wisdom of Jesus Ben Sira. This is a late wisdom book, which survives in its entirety in Greek. Something of the complicated history of the text can be gleaned from the final chapter, where we read:

Instruction in understanding and knowledge I have written in this book, Jesus son of Eleazar son of Sirach of Jerusalem, whose mind poured forth wisdom. (Sir 50:27)

The book is a translation completed some time after 117 BC. The Hebrew original is usually dated to between 195-180 BC. The book as a whole is scholarly and belongs not to proverbial wisdom but to tractate wisdom as found in Job or Qoheleth. It contains a number of marvellous nature poems, praising God, the creator, present in all that exists.

RELATED READINGS

Deliberations
 Let your discussion be with intelligent people, and all your exposition in the law of the Most High. (Sir 9:15)

Do not try to treat him as an equal, or trust his lengthy conversations; for he will test you by prolonged talk, and while he smiles he will be examining you. (Sir 13:11)

Some people keep silent and are thought to be wise, while others are detested for being talkative. Some people keep silent because they have nothing to say, while others keep silent because they know when to speak. The wise remain silent until the right moment, but a boasting fool misses the right moment. Whoever talks too much is detested, and whoever pretends to authority is hated. (Sir 20:5-8)

The emotions of a foolish person are like a wheel of a wagon, and his argument is like a turning axle. (Sir 33:5)

Heart (= mind)
 The heart of the intelligent will think of an illustration, and a hearer's ear is the desire of the wise. (Sir 3:29)

Deliberation and a tongue and eyes, ears and a heart for thinking he gave them. (Sir 17:6)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 4 A very domestic image is used, the familiar sieve. But the word refuse is startling. In Greek, this is *kopria* with the following range of meanings: dung, manure, manure pile, filth, dirt. In sorting the grain from the husks, the sieve makes the useless "stuff" obvious. A person's reasoning works like a sieve, in that it makes obvious the crap (*skubala* - human excrement). *The same word is used by Paul in Philippians: More than that, I now regard*

all things as liabilities compared to the far greater value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things—indeed, I regard them as dung!—that I may gain Christ. (Phil 3:8) Reasoning or *logismos* denotes not just the capacity to reason but the fruits of the use of that capacity, so, *calculation, reasoning, reflection, thought.*

Commentators admit that this metaphor of the sieve is not the clearest or most apt. It seems that something like this lies behind it: *After oxen had threshed grain, it was placed in a sieve that retained the husks and dung while allowing the kernels to pass through for immediate use or temporary storage.*

(James L. Crenshaw, "The Book of Sirach," in *Introduction to Wisdom Literature; Proverbs-Sirach*, vol. 5 of *NIB*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 768.)

Verse 5 The second image stays within domestic range — the firing of pots in a kiln or furnace. If the quality is good, the pots survive the heat; if not, the pots will come out cracked. Likewise, conversation / deliberation tests the quality of the human person. Again the verb "test" has a good range of meanings: to make a critical examination of something to determine genuineness, *put to the test, examine.*

Verse 6 The writer turns to a more regular image from farming / horticulture. The quality of the care given to both ground and plant will become evident in the fruits. In this verse, heart means the seat of the thought, not emotion.

Verse 7 This concluding aphorism summarises the preceding verses. In a word: do not prejudge or assess anyone until you have heard him/her speak and see how their minds work.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

- 1.** Manner of speech can be very revealing — not just what one says but how one says it.
- 2.** It is easy to prejudge people before they say or do anything—a natural human tendency, but to be resisted.

PRAYER

Creator God, to you we owe everything we are and have, including our capacity to think and to communicate. Help us to be wise users of these great gifts so that all we say and do will be both true and constructive. May our yes be yes and our no be no. Amen.

THE LITURGY

Sirach 27:4-7; Ps 92 (91); 1 Corinthians 15:54-58; Luke 6:39-45

READINGS 1 AND 3

Initially, the image of fruit may seem to draw the readings together. Actually, it is deeper: going into the person's heart and inner disposition — all revealed by word and deed.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

For this Psalm, the tree becomes a palm tree, planted in the temple, an image of continued fruitfulness.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First Reading

Sirach 24:4-7

In this reading, three images are used: a sieve, a kiln and a tree. All three test things so that the true qualities stand out.

Second Reading

1 Corinthians 15:54-58

After his long reflection on the resurrection of the body in chapter 15, Paul affirms his faith, in somewhat mysterious language. At the centre stands Paul's faith in Jesus, risen from the dead, the pattern of all our rising.

Gospel

Luke 6:39-45

Jesus was a wisdom teacher and he really goes to the heart of the matter. The invitation in this Gospel is to inner transformation. The hope is that our outward living will be consistent without inward convictions. Nearly all religions teach something like this — but it is possible in the Christian vision because of the grace of God in Christ.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 28 February

1 Peter 1:3-9

This is a prayer—a prayer very close to experience and very true to life.

Mark 10:17-27

Here we have an attractive and yet unsettling story. The man is the story is obviously good and a little naive. He doesn't seem to know himself. Jesus'

penetrating glance of love sees great potential in him. Suddenly, it is too much and the man slinks away. We too can fool ourselves. We too need the penetrating glance of love which lays bare the cost of discipleship.

Tuesday 1 March

St David, bishop

1 Peter 1:10-16

How are we to respond to the Gospel, the Good News? This reading, especially in the final paragraph put it up to us.

Mark 10:17-27

Here we have an attractive and yet unsettling story. The man is the story is obviously good and a little naive. He doesn't seem to know himself. Jesus' penetrating glance of love sees great potential in him. Suddenly, it is too much and the man slinks away. We too can fool ourselves. We too need the penetrating glance of love which lays bare the cost of discipleship.



ASH WEDNESDAY 2 MARCH

Joel 2:12-18

The passage which opens the journey of Lent is an invitation, an invitation to come back to the Lord with all our heart. The whole community—all of us without distinction—is called to change of heart and life.

2 Corinthians 5:20-6:2

Paul's message insists on today, now, as the moment of conversion. The past is over and the future is not yet. All we have is the present moment: let us take hold of it with all our energy.

Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

As Matthew makes clear, it is the movement of the heart that counts! There was a traditional triad in Judaism: almsgiving, prayer and fasting—all really good and necessary. That inherent good can be compromised by the desire for notice and approval. It is enough and more than enough that the Father who

sees in secret sees our good deed done in secret.

Thursday 3 March

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Life is full of choices, minor and major. Today, we hear a major choice: life and prosperity or death and disaster. Such sharp alternatives are found also in the wisdom writings of the people, such as today's Psalm 1. We know, of course, that things are often not quite so stark and clear. But even in the minor choices, we are implying greater choices and even a fundamental direction of life.

Luke 9:22-25

As usual, a prediction of the passion is joined to a teaching on discipleship. In this Gospel, the death of Jesus casts a long shadow, starting with the words of Simeon to Mary. The immediate context is the question to Peter: who do you say I am?

Friday 4 March

Isaiah 58:1-9

What is true fasting? What does God require of us? Isaiah does not mince his words. Sure fasting means to live your ordinary life with integrity and justice.

Matthew 9:14-15

It looks as if Jesus did not practice fasting (apart from the forty, symbolic days). Naturally, people wondered why not. In the later tradition, disciples did take up fasting and in our Gospel Jesus gives "permission" for that to happen.

Saturday 5 March

Isaiah 58:9-14

Continuing from yesterday, we are reminded that righteousness—right living from the inside out—is what God hopes for from us. If you listen carefully, this prophecy is strongly against violence of any kind.

Luke 5:27-32

Eating was always regarded as a kind of sacred fellowship, a kind of holy communion. Hence the shock of onlookers who saw Jesus eating with tax collectors and sinner, in effect, establishing communion with them.