

Some background to the Reading from Ecclesiasticus at the Funeral service of Prince Philip

As I watched the moving funeral service of the Duke of Edinburgh on Saturday 17th April, I was impressed by the fact that Prince Philip himself had been responsible for most of the contents of the service. One element in particular intrigued and impressed me, namely the selection of that beautiful passage from Chapter 43 of the Ecclesiasticus praising God's creation of the natural world. Ecclesiasticus is also called the Wisdom of Jesus son of Sirach and is found in the Apocrypha which means that it is not what the Protestant churches call a Canonical work, that is it may be a valuable example of and guide to life and contain much wisdom, but does not have doctrinal significance. It is however recognised as canonical by both the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches and its selection by the Duke of Edinburgh reminds us of his birth into and early years as an adherent of the Greek Orthodox faith.

The Book was probably written in Hebrew during the years 200-175 B.C. but was translated into Greek about half a century later in Alexandria where scholars had already created the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures. It is a work that contains moral teaching, historical material on the fathers and heroes of the Jewish people, one of the earliest statements in praise of the medical profession, and the praise of God. We also often use the first part of Ch. 44 during our Remembrance Day services with its call to remember both the famous and the humble.

In the Common Lectionary you will find this passage recommended as a reading in Year B for the Second Service on the 19th Sunday in Ordinary Time, or the 10th Sunday after Trinity. It is a passage of great beauty and challenges us to remember that we live in a universe created by God and of our duty to protect it as we enjoy it. Read it again and enjoy it.

Michael Harris

*“Look at the rainbow and praise its Maker;
It shines with a supreme beauty,
rounding the sky with its gleaming arc,
a bow bent by the hands of the Most High.*

*His command speeds the snow-storm
and sends the swift lightning to execute his sentence.
To that end the storehouses are opened,
and the clouds fly out like birds.
By his mighty power the clouds are piled up
and the hailstones broken small.*

*The crash of his thunder makes the earth writhe,
and, when he appears, an earthquake shakes the hills.*

*At his will the south wind blows,
the squall from the north and the hurricane.
He scatters the snow-flakes like birds alighting;
they settle like a swarm of locusts.
The eye is dazzled by their beautiful whiteness,
and as they fall the mind is entranced.*

*He spreads frost on the earth like salt,
and icicles form like pointed stakes.
A cold blast from the north,
and ice grows hard on the water,
settling on every pool,
as though the water were putting on a breastplate.*

*He consumes the hills, scorches the wilderness,
and withers the grass like fire.*

*Cloudy weather quickly puts all to rights,
And dew brings welcome relief after heat.
By the power of his thought, he tamed the deep
and planted it with islands.*

*Those who sail the sea tell stories of its dangers,
which astonish all who hear them;
in it are strange and wonderful creatures,
all kinds of living things and huge sea-monsters.
By his own action he achieves his end,
and by his word all things are held together.”*

Ecclesiasticus Ch. 43: 11-26 (New English Bible)