Homily by Martha Horne for daily Eucharist of General Convention  
June 16, 2006  
Columbus, Ohio

Propers for Joseph Butler, June 16:   Wisdom 7:7-14  
Psalms 119: 89-96  

It’s a rather curious convergence of themes that we encounter this morning. Our liturgical calendar designates this as a day of commemoration for Joseph Butler, 18th century Anglican Bishop of Durham, a moral theologian – perhaps one of the finest theologians of the age of reason - and author of the *Analogy of Reason*, a treatise on the “reasonable probability” of the Christian faith. But as Bishop Griswold indicated in his letter of invitation, this is also the day when General Convention will pay particular tribute to the many ministries of women in our Church.

Given the dual focus of the day, I first thought I should try to find a way of connecting the two, but the effort proved to be too much of a stretch. Bp. Butler never married, his biographers make no mention of sisters (or, for that matter, his mother), and the good bishop himself is remarkably silent in his writings on the matter of women. Biographers note that he was a court favorite of Queen Caroline, a woman reputed to have a lively and enquiring mind. She appointed him Clerk of the Closet, which meant that Butler was expected to attend nightly gatherings of men of wit and learning. Unfortunately, even that promising tidbit proved to be useless, since there is no record of their conversations.
Undaunted, I returned to the first principle of homiletics: one we work hard to instill in our seminarians: when given a sermon to preach, always start with the appointed texts! With a sense of renewed hope I opened my bible to the texts appointed for today – three short lessons we’ve just heard: seven verses from Wisdom, four verses from Luke, and seven verses of Psalm 119.

It’s not hard to understand why the reading from Luke commended itself to those responsible for our Lesser Feasts and Fasts lectionary. Having left his Presbyterian roots to study law, Butler was intrigued and ultimately distracted by the study of divinity, which he described as being “the most suitable for his reasonable nature.” To one of his teachers he wrote “I design the search for truth as the business of my life.” The young Joseph Butler bears a striking resemblance to the earnest lawyer in Luke’s gospel who puts Jesus to the test with his question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life”? Prompted by Jesus he recited the Law he had been taught in the Hebrew scriptures: you shall “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, with all your strength, and will all your mind; and to love your neighbors as ourselves.” “Do this and you will live”, Jesus said. With its straightforward teaching about the living of a holy life, it’s a good text for a moral theologian. The same might be said of the verses from Psalm 119; they amplify the lesson of the gospel, driving home the importance of the Law; “without the Law I would be lost”, says the psalmist; “it is the Law which gives life to those who embrace it.”

But law and reason are not the only words for today; the scriptures have still more to say. Remember those eight verses from the Book of Wisdom? Their poetry is as different from the prose of the gospel as night is from day. Here it is the spirit of wisdom that is to be desired above all else; wisdom, rather than Law, is the great treasure. How great a treasure is this wisdom, sent
by God to bring understanding? “I loved her more than health and beauty”, says the poet rhapsodically, as lovers speak of their beloved, “I chose to have her rather than light because her radiance never ceases. I did not liken her to any priceless gem, because all gold is but little sand in her sight and silver will be accounted as clay before her.” Note the lush, lyrical language, the extravagant imagery, and yes, note the feminine pronouns. Wisdom is personified in the form of a woman most highly to be desired. Desire for her is greater than the power of scepters and thrones; in wisdom’s alluring presence, wealth and riches pale as nothing in comparison.

I find it remarkable that these three short texts could contain so many creative tensions. In just eighteen verses we hear the juxtaposition of law and wisdom, of reason and inspiration, of poetry and prose, of masculine and feminine. Each could be seen as a pair of contradictions, yet they are, in fact, complementary, and they point beyond themselves to the God who is the source of all. These texts remind us that divine revelation comes in many shapes and forms: through law and inspiration, through reason and spirit, through poetry and prose, through male and female.

How fitting it is that these should be our texts for today, as we give thanks for the gifts bestowed on the Church by Joseph Butler and the gifts of women in all times and places. How impoverished we would be without their point and counterpoint. A world without reason or law would be a chaotic and disordered place, but the spirit of wisdom brings both nuance and understanding. The Law gives direction and purpose to life, while the spirit of wisdom shines light on our path. A world of all men or all women would be deadly boring and would soon cease to exist. And our faith is sorely lacking if the only word we hear is law and not grace.
Joseph Butler and the women of the church: an odd pairing, perhaps at first sight, yet the agents of God’s work: the chosen vessels of God’s grace and the lights of the world in their own generations. For each we say a resounding “Thanks be to God!”