

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time - C

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

1st Reading - Wisdom 9:13-18b

The Book of Wisdom is unique in the Bible as being the product of a Greek frame of mind, for the author is a Hellenized Jew, thoroughly familiar with Greek culture, writing probably at Alexandria in about 50 BC.

Against the background of Egyptian worship of animals and mockery of Jewish trust in God, the author devotes much of the first part of the book to the ineffectiveness of such mockery when God has promised immortality to those who remain faithful. Using Greek modes of thought, he is the first to express the hope of after-life in terms of immortality of the individual soul. In the 2nd section of the book Solomon, the master of wisdom (to whom authorship of the book is conventionally attributed), speaks in praise of Wisdom. This reaches its high point in the descriptions of Wisdom as God's own power at work in the world. The third section of the book is devoted to a rather flowery history, concentrating chiefly on the ineffective opposition of the Egyptians to God's people at the time of the Exodus. Using Jewish legends and other amplification of the biblical account, the author points a contrast between the wonders God worked for Israel and the adverse effect of the same wonders on the Egyptians, stressing constantly the folly of Egyptian worship of animals and idols.

Perhaps the single-most important contribution of the book consists in its reflections on Wisdom, and especially the personification of Wisdom as God's agent in the world, yet sharing intimately in His nature. The ground is prepared for the understanding of Jesus as the incarnate Wisdom of God. It is also valuable to see Judaism beyond the frontiers of Palestine, at grips with the varied worship of the Greco-Roman world, and to see it developing such ideas as that of the individual as a child of God. Because it was written after 400 BC and in Greek, the Book of Wisdom is not in the Hebrew canon of Scripture, and consequently it does not appear in the Protestant Bibles.

Today we hear the conclusion of Solomon's prayer for Wisdom.

¹³ For what man knows God's counsel, or who can conceive what our LORD intends? ¹⁴ For the deliberations of mortals are timid,

Uncertain

and unsure are our plans. ¹⁵ For the corruptible body burdens the soul and the earthen shelter weighs down the mind that has many concerns.

This verse is reminiscent of Plato. It has caused the author to be falsely accused of a dualism, which pronounces matter evil. In fact, he simply states that our deliberations are weak and earthbound because of the body and its concerns.

¹⁶ And scarce do we guess the things on earth, and what is within our grasp we find with difficulty; but when things are in heaven, who can search them out? ¹⁷ Or who ever knew your counsel,

The Greek word *boulē*, translated here as “counsel,” is probably not the plan of God, but what God wishes people to do (He counsels, but do they listen?).

except you had given Wisdom and sent your holy spirit from on high?

Wisdom is a personification of the functions of Yahweh. In earlier wisdom literature, wisdom was an effect of the spirit of God. Here, Wisdom is identified with the spirit of the Lord and becomes the internal principle of physical and moral life. The Hebrews did not conceive of humans as constituted of a material body and a spiritual soul; the human being was a unity.

^{18a,b} And thus were the paths of those on earth made straight.

2nd Reading - Philemon 9-10, 12-17

Philemon was a wealthy Colossian; a personal friend of Paul, who had converted him to the faith. He had a slave called Onesimus (O-nis-see-mus), who robbed his master and fled to Rome where he hoped to escape capture by disappearing into the large population. The grace of God led the poor runaway slave to the prison-house of St. Paul. The apostle took compassion on him, received him with tenderness, and won him for Christ. Then he sent him back to his master in Colossae with a letter to plead for him – not only to save him from a severe penalty, but to ask for him to be shown sympathy, affection, and Christian brotherhood. It is this appeal that we hear today.

The result of the appeal cannot be doubted. Tradition has it that Onesimus became bishop of Ephesus and suffered martyrdom in Rome about the same time as St. Ignatius of Antioch (AD 109-110).

⁹ I [], Paul, an old man, and now also a prisoner for Christ Jesus.

“Paul has not used ‘prisoner for Christ Jesus’ in any other epistle as a part of his name, though he has used it in Ephesians and in Philippians as a form of proclamation. Thus, I think it of more importance that he says he is a prisoner of Christ Jesus than an apostle. Indeed, the apostles gloried that they were worthy to suffer abuse for the name of Jesus Christ.” [Saint Jerome (A.D. 386), *Commentary on the Epistle to Philemon*]

¹⁰ I urge you on behalf of my child Onesimus, whose father I have become in my imprisonment;

Saint Paul alludes to Onesimus's conversion. "Onesimus" means "profitable one" and Paul implies that this slave, now a Christian, will live up to his name.

¹² I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. ¹³ I should have liked to retain him for myself, so that he might serve me on your behalf in my imprisonment for the gospel,

"Paul indicates that had he kept Onesimus, the result would have been that he could serve Paul as an extension of Philemon's service and thus have been a source of gain for Philemon." [Theodore of Mopsuestia (died A.D. 428), *Commentary on Philemon*]

¹⁴ but I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that the good you do might not be forced but voluntary.

Paul acknowledges the master's right to the slave, but hints that he would like to have him back to work with him.

¹⁵ Perhaps this is why he was away from you for a while, that you might have him back forever,

The slave is now returning more faithful than ever – additionally, a new relationship exists between them: both are now Christians, related in a way that not even death can undo.

"Onesimus' flight has become the source of good things to him." [Theodoret of Cyr (died A.D. 466), *Commentary on Philemon*]

¹⁶ no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a brother, beloved especially to me, but even more so to you, as a man and in the Lord.

Onesimus, like Philemon, is an adopted child of God through baptism (see Romans 8:15).

¹⁷ So if you regard me as a partner, welcome him as you would me.

Gospel - Luke 14:25-33

People are now streaming from all the streets and lanes. The poor and the maimed and blind and lame now cured (v21) form great crowds surrounding Jesus. In last week's reading Jesus had told the crowd that attendance at the heavenly banquet depends upon an invitation from God, and God invites those who recognize their lowliness and their need of salvation. Jesus now demands total dedication from His disciples.

²⁵ Great crowds were traveling with him, and he turned and addressed them, ²⁶ "If any one

comes to me without hating his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.

This does not mean abandoning or ignoring them, but loving them less than they love God.

²⁷ Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.

The Greek word used here for “take up” is identical to the one used by John when he describes Jesus on the way to Calvary. Luke here expects a very close – we might even say, literal – following of Jesus in His suffering and death.

²⁸ Which of you wishing to construct a tower does not first sit down and calculate the cost to see if there is enough for its completion? ²⁹ Otherwise, after laying the foundation and finding himself unable to finish the work the onlookers should laugh at him ³⁰ and say, ‘This one began to build but did not have the resources to finish.’ ³¹ Or what king marching into battle would not first sit down and decide whether with ten thousand troops he can successfully oppose another king advancing upon him with twenty thousand troops? ³² But if not, while he is still far away, he will send a delegation to ask for peace terms. ³³ In the same way, everyone of you who does not renounce all his possessions cannot be my disciple.”

There is a cost to being a disciple of Jesus – you cannot act on impulse, but only on a carefully considered program of involvement.