

Twenty-Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year B



FIRST READING
Wisdom of Solomon 7:7–11

PSALM
Psalm 90:12–17

SECOND READING
Hebrews 4:12–13

GOSPEL
Mark 10:17–30

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PRAYER

Psalm 90:12–17

Teach us to count our days
that we may gain a wise heart.
Turn, O LORD! How long?
Have compassion on your servants!
Satisfy us in the morning
with your steadfast love,
so that we may rejoice
and be glad all our days.
Make us glad
as many days as you have afflicted us,
and as many years as we have seen evil.
Let your work
be manifest to your servants,
and your glorious power
to their children.
Let the favor of the LORD our God
be upon us,
and prosper for us
the work of our hands—
O prosper the work of our hands!

READING THE WORD

First Reading

Wisdom of Solomon 7:7–11

I prayed,
and understanding was given me;
I called on God,
and the spirit of wisdom came to me.
I preferred her to scepters and thrones,
and I accounted wealth as nothing
in comparison with her.

Neither did I liken to her
any priceless gem,
because all gold is but a little sand
in her sight,
and silver will be accounted
as clay before her.
I loved her more
than health and beauty,
and I chose to have her
rather than light,
because her radiance never ceases.
All good things
came to me along with her,
and in her hands uncounted wealth.

Second Reading

Hebrews 4:12–13

Indeed, the word of God is living
and active, sharper than any
two-edged sword, piercing until
it divides soul from spirit, joints
from marrow; it is able to judge
the thoughts and intentions of the
heart. And before him no creature
is hidden, but all are naked and laid
bare to the eyes of the one to whom
we must render an account.

Gospel

Mark 10:17–30

As he was setting out on a journey,
a man ran up and knelt before him,
and asked him, “Good Teacher, what
must I do to inherit eternal life?”
Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me
good? No one is good but God alone.

You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.’” He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” They were greatly astounded and said to one another, “Then who can be saved?” Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”

Peter began to say to him, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.” Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or

father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life.

HEARING THE WORD **“A Difficult but Wise Choice”**

Choosing wisely requires having the right perspective on life. Today’s liturgy provides believers with just such a perspective, so that they may make life choices that will determine their eternal fate.

In the first reading, king Solomon addresses his fellow monarchs and rulers of the kingdoms of the earth. He advises them, that in order to rule with integrity, sensitiveness and justice, to be truly great rulers, they need wisdom from the one true God. Solomon was an ordinary human being. He was carried in his mother’s womb, was born and breathed the common air, he cried and lay in swaddling clothes (cf. Wis 7:1-6). However, he achieved unparalleled greatness because he sought wisdom from God. Wisdom of the highest kind, one which brings insights into the deepest mysteries of life, cannot be attained by human efforts. Only God can grant this kind of supernatural wisdom. Solomon rightly assumed that possession of God’s wisdom would enable him to rule justly, and make him a respected and successful king. Thus, at the beginning of his rule, instead

of praying for wealth and power, Solomon wisely chose to pray for understanding and wisdom. He cherished wisdom and placed himself under her guidance. With wisdom on his side, Solomon enjoyed all the wealth and success that a king may desire. Solomon’s story proves that pursuit of God’s wisdom, in preference to all else, leads to lasting success and true greatness.

The second reading comes from the section of the letter to the Hebrews, where the author discusses the failure of the Exodus generation of the Israelites. Those who escaped the Egyptian enslavement, failed to reach the promised land because they repeatedly disobeyed God’s word. Addressing Christians, the author of Hebrews emphasizes the power of God. He does so to motivate Christians to adhere to the word and obey it. He uses analogy of the sword to describe how God’s word can reveal and judge the person’s hidden motives and desires. Just as a sword can penetrate the human body, so also the word of God can separate different parts of the human being, exposing that which cannot otherwise be seen. All attempts to conceal one’s true intentions and thoughts from God are doomed to failure, and are futile, because God’s word is all-powerful and ever active in revealing and judging everyone in truth. Writing this, the author indicates that the wise choice, and, in fact, the only choice for Christians, is to hear the word of God

and respond to it wholeheartedly.

The man who came to Jesus was wealthy, he already enjoyed God’s blessings and security in this life. But he sought eternal life as well. He was thinking ahead and wanted to ensure his security and success in this life and in the next. In response to his inquiry about the path to eternal life, Jesus, the good teacher, gave him two responses. First, somewhat surprisingly, Jesus answered with his own question, “why do you call me good?” This might suggest that Jesus denied his own goodness. In fact, he only pointed out that God is the source of all goodness. Second, Jesus quoted selected commandments from the Decalogue. Interestingly, he added, “you shall not defraud” – the demand not found among the ten commandments. In response, the man confirmed that he had lived an impeccable life according to the law, without breaking the commandments or defrauding others. He was a genuine and sincere person, whose wealth was acquired through legitimate means. But eternal life requires more. Jesus asked the man to give away all his possessions and follow him. The wealthy man was thus asked to choose between eternal life and his earthly treasures. But he wanted to have both! Faced with a difficult choice, the man found it impossible to leave all he had. He chose his wealth, and walked away from Jesus. He walked away sad, which is Mark’s way of saying that the man realized

that the choice he had made was not a wise one.

Jesus used this incident to teach the disciples how wealth can be an obstacle to salvation. In itself, material wealth is not bad. However, for many, pursuit of wealth becomes the sole focus and purpose of life. In such cases wealth claims the person's loyalty, and assumes the central role in their life. When this happens, all else, even God himself, are pushed aside, and play only a secondary role. This is exactly what happened in the case of the wealthy man.

Jesus went on to emphasize that entry into God's kingdom and salvation require a difficult but decisive choice. This choice is to make God the central priority one's life. Such choice for the wealthy is as difficult as it is for a camel to squeeze through the eye of a needle. This startling image is meant to shock the disciples into the realization that salvation requires great effort and sacrifice in making the right choices. Human beings cannot save themselves, only God can. Because only God can grant salvation, it can be reached only through giving absolute priority to God, and focusing all one's efforts on the pursuit of his kingdom. Everything else, especially wealth, becomes a danger if it obscures this purpose.

Peter reminded Jesus, that, unlike the wealthy man, he and other disciples had left everything and followed him. Perhaps Jesus' shocking example of the camel had made Peter worry

about his own salvation. Jesus assured his disciples that whatever they gave up will come back to them, be it in different forms. Since they had left their immediate families, they will become a part of a new and very numerous family, the family of God's people. Their property will extend beyond that of their individual possessions. They will also encounter persecutions. Discipleship will include confronting adversity, and suffering. However, all this ultimately leads to eternal life. Since the disciples had made the difficult, but wise, choice for Jesus, they will reach salvation. Salvation which the rich man desired, but forfeited by an unwise choice of life's focus.

Making wise choices requires a clear focus. Solomon wanted to be a just and great king. Therefore, he preferred God's wisdom to wealth and power, knowing that only God can lead him in the right way. The author of Hebrews exhorts Christians to make a wise choice in responding to God's word. This word alone can shape their lives in a way that will secure God's favourable judgment in the future. The wealthy man from the gospel made a bad choice in preferring his wealth to Jesus. His reliance on material securities bound him to this earth, and barred his way to eternal life, in much the same way that the eye of a needle prevents the camel from squeezing through. Only firm focus on God and his kingdom can secure salvation, and open the way to eternal life. Wisdom, God's word and focus on God will

determine the choices of the believer concerned about eternal life, which will follow their inevitable death. This is exactly what the Psalmist recognized as he prayed to the Lord, "teach us to count our days, that we may gain a wise heart."

LISTENING TO THE WORD OF GOD

Life presents us with so many choices. Many of our elders remember the "good old days" when the choices available were rather limited. A person's life in traditional societies was largely determined by the circumstance into which they were born. Thus, if a child was born in a farming family, he or she would remain a farmer. If someone was born on the shores of a lake, they would most likely become a fisherman. Girls would be expected to become wives and mothers, boys, husbands and fathers. Modern society has changed all this. Most people, particularly young people, have many choices available to them. With education and an urban lifestyle there are numerous opportunities and possibilities for choosing an occupation, career and lifestyle. One can also choose whether to believe in God, or become an atheist, or an indifferent agnostic. This situation makes the issue of making the right choices much more significant than it ever was in the past.

Today's readings suggest the two most important questions that a person needs to ask of himself or herself while making significant life choices. First,

like king Solomon, we need to ask ourselves who do we want to be in life. This question goes beyond the choice of a career or occupation. Rather, it is a question of who we want to become in the eyes of others. Solomon did not desire to be seen as a wealthy and powerful king. He wanted to be a just and good ruler. In his choice, he was concerned with how he wanted to impact others, not with how to control his subjects. This raises an important question for us. Do we want to be evaluated on the basis of what we achieved for ourselves, or on the basis of our impact on others? In simple terms, do I make my choices to stand apart from the rest by becoming richer, more famous or more influential than everybody else? Or, am I concerned about becoming important by a life of justice, integrity and concern for the wellbeing of others?

The second important question is that of my focus in life. Many people stubbornly refuse to admit that their life on earth will end one day. With it, all securities and wealth that they have gathered, with great effort and concern, will cease to have any meaning. Life choices need to be made in the broader perspective of life that goes beyond this world. What determines and secures my life, after all that I have here on earth is taken away from me? Of course, we need to secure our life on earth by pursuing education, material security and advancement. But these can never dominate

us so completely as to make us walk away from Jesus. It is only his teaching and his ways that can lead us to living our life on this earth, in such a way as to be on the path to eternal life. The difficult but wise choice is to put preference on being a true Christian first, and then concern ourselves with securing our material prosperity. These two need to be finely balanced, but the faith perspective must never be lost, or even obscured, by other concerns.

The readings of today advise us not to allow anything in life to become “an eye of the needle”. Our life is a beautiful gift from God, a gift that ought not to be wasted on things and pursuits that ultimately do not matter. By choosing carefully who we want to be, and where we want to be in the long run, we have the power to ensure that we will never become a camel trying to achieve the impossible.

PROVERB

*“The wealth
which enslaves
its owner,
isn’t wealth.”*

ACTION

Self-examination:

When was the last time I had to make a significant choice in life? What concerns guided me in making this choice?

What role do concerns about material wealth play in my life? Am I guided solely by the need to become ever wealthier?

Response to God:

I will reflect on the values that would draw me closer to God, and make me grow in my humanity. In this reflection I will turn to God’s word in the scripture and seek guidance there.

Response to your World:

This week, whenever called to make even a relatively simple choice, I will take time to reflect on what concerns and motifs determine what I am about to choose. We will invite a person to our meeting who will be able to help us to understand better the principles for living a successful life, as outlined in the Scripture.

PRAYER

*Lord God,
like the wealthy man
from the Gospel story,
I come to you,
asking for guidance
on how to live my life,
so that I can be
united with you in eternity.
I ask for guidance
and the empowerment
of the Holy Spirit,
to make the right
and, if needed, difficult choices,
that will bring me closer to you,
and make me
your servant in this world.
I pray through Jesus Christ,
my Lord.
Amen.*