

Twenty Third Sunday
in Ordinary Time

YEAR C

Prayer

Psalm 90:3-6, 12-14, 17

You turn us back to dust, and say, "Turn back, you mortals." For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night.

You sweep them away; they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning; in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers.

So 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.

Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and prosper for us the work of our hands; prosper the work of our hands!

Reading the Word

First Reading:

Wisdom of Solomon 9:13-18

For who can learn the counsel of God? Or who can discern what the Lord wills?

For the reasoning of mortals is worthless, and our designs are likely to fail; for a perishable body weighs down the soul, and this earthy tent burdens the thoughtful mind.

We can hardly guess at what is on earth, and what is at



hand we find with labor; but who has traced out what is in the heavens?

Who has learned your counsel, unless you have given wisdom and sent your holy spirit from on high?

And thus the paths of those on earth were set right, and people were taught what pleases you, and were saved by wisdom."

Second Reading:

Philemon 9-10, 12-17

I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love—and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment.

I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother—especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in

FIRST READING

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PSALM

Psalm 90:3-6, 12-14, 17

SECOND READING

Philemon 9-10, 12-17

GOSPEL

Luke 14:25-33

the Lord. So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.

Gospel: Luke 14:25-33

Now large crowds were traveling with Jesus; and he turned and said to them, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.' Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace. So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.

*Scripture quotations from
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Hearing the Word

"Wisdom for Lasting Happiness"

Lasting happiness, or, in religious terms, salvation, has always been one of the chief concerns of human beings. This quest for salvation and the ways to reach it dominate today's readings. Wisdom expresses itself through an ability to live well and to reach lasting happiness. But where does one find guidelines for such a life? The book of Wisdom seeks to answer this question.

The author begins by acknowledging that human beings are incapable of fully grasping the mystery of life, because their understanding and reasoning are limited and fallible. He attributes this condition to the weakness of the human body which is perishable and frail. Thus, people are destined to seek sure answers but arrive at incomplete conclusions. If they can "hardly guess" at what is on earth, they can never comprehend the heavenly world. Human wisdom is entirely based on the experiences of this world and therefore is earthbound. Since all things of this world are temporary and perishable, human wisdom and reasoning cannot provide answers on how to reach permanent and lasting happiness. Thus, eternal wisdom is beyond human capacities, and cannot be achieved by human means.

This initial and very discouraging conclusion is counter-balanced by a very encouraging statement that there is a way for human beings to come to true and eternal

wisdom – it can be bestowed by God. God reveals the paths to lasting happiness and gives instruction on how to reach eternity through his Spirit. This Spirit endows human beings with understanding, and sets the paths of earthly beings in the right direction. God's Spirit brings divine wisdom to human beings so that they might be saved by it.

God gives his wisdom to those who attentively listen to his guidance. Whoever seeks wisdom that leads to lasting happiness must search for it not in the earthly realm but in the divine revelation. A wise person rises above purely human reasoning, opening their eyes to the realities that transcend human concerns and living by the values revealed and taught by God. This is the path to enduring happiness, to salvation.

The second reading comes from a short but very personal letter of Paul to one of his converts, Philemon. Philemon must have been a relatively wealthy person, the head of a household and owner of slaves. One of those slaves, Onesimus, ran away from him. This fugitive met with and was converted to Christianity by Paul who, henceforth, calls him "my child". Paul wrote to Philemon with an appeal to accept Onesimus back into the household. His request had double significance.

According to the social system of the day, as the owner, Philemon had the right to severely punish or even execute the runaway slave. Paul wanted to ensure that Onesimus

would not suffer such a fate and pleaded with Philemon for forgiveness without any recriminations.

More significantly, Paul asked Philemon to accept Onesimus as a "beloved brother". He did not ask Philemon to liberate Onesimus from slavery altogether. Instead, he made a request that was even more challenging and truly revolutionary. At the time, slaves were not considered human being but objects, "things" to be used and discarded when no longer needed. To accept Onesimus as his brother, Philemon would have to make a radical change in his thinking, and treat a slave as a person equal in dignity and humanity to himself. This was unheard of at the time. It was this type of mindset change which Christianity introduced, and which would eventually lead to the abolishment of slavery.

Making this request, Paul reveals his vision for a new community and, indeed, a new humanity, based on the principle of equality. This equality is founded on the common identity all believers share as God's children through Christ. Christian life and interpersonal relationships were to be built on this principle. It was a manner of life that could be justifiably called "wise living" as it led to the harmony and unity among the members. For Paul, the lasting happiness begins in the Christian community built on equality in dignity and unity in diversity. Such a community was a living reflection of the

divine wisdom for a happy life already in this world.

In the Gospel reading, Jesus provides three essential guidelines which ought to shape the life of his followers seeking salvation. The first is a command to come to Jesus and “hate” one’s family and even one’s life. In the language of Jesus’ time, the word translated as “hate” carried the meaning of “love less” or “prefer less” (cf. Matt 10:37; Gen 29:30-31). Speaking of “hating” one’s family and one’s life Jesus teaches that loyalty to him holds priority over loyalty to the family and even to preserving one’s life. Lasting happiness can be reached by setting Jesus as the first priority in one’s life.

The second guideline commands Jesus’ follower to carry his or her cross. Jesus literally carried his own cross to the place of crucifixion. For his followers, this implies that they must adhere to Jesus in the circumstances of adversity and suffering, when discipleship becomes costly and even life-threatening. Lasting happiness is reached by adhering to Jesus equally in the good and in the bad times.

The third guideline calls for renouncing one’s possessions. Luke consistently sees attachment to material things as the main threat and obstacle to discipleship. This is yet another call for making Jesus the first priority. To make his point more forceful, Jesus demands that his disciples give up “all possessions”. This exaggeration serves to emphasize that there can be no divided loyalties in the disciple’s life. Jesus

must be the sole focus for life and the chief concern, with possessions and wealth relegated to a far distant, secondary role.

The passage ends with a warning. A builder constructing a tower without sufficient funds and a king going to war without proper preparation would be fools and a laughing stock. Similarly, those who come to Jesus without taking the cost of discipleship into account will fail. The pursuit of lasting happiness involves making tough choices, setting priorities, embracing suffering, and renouncing greed. Following these guidelines is the choice of the wise.

Today’s liturgy teaches that to reach lasting happiness, to be saved, one needs to think and act according to divine wisdom. This wisdom differs, often drastically, from earth-bound human reasoning and concerns, as the book of Wisdom plainly reveals. Paul sees the divine wisdom reflected in a life based on equality, and shared identity of the community members, which provides for harmony and unity. Jesus lays down three very specific guidelines, teaching that the path to eternity leads through commitment to himself, and his teaching, regardless of the circumstances. This requires making Jesus a central priority in a person’s life, above loyalty to the family, and concerns with material security. This is a difficult teaching, but one that reflects the divine wisdom for which the Psalmist prayed in the words, “teach us to count

our days that we may gain a wise heart.”

Listening to the Word of God

Every way of life requires a specific set of principles, a manual which dictates how to make a way through life. The manual for an authentic Christian life is the wisdom of God which ultimately leads to eternal happiness. The readings of today point out how we may attain this necessary wisdom of God. Divine wisdom is that which we attain by seeking the presence of God through self-emptying of our unhealthy ambitions, replacing them with the virtues such as equality, forgiveness, and self-sacrifice.

God created humanity in his own image. This fact gives us the possibility of gaining access to God’s divine wisdom which is necessary for responding to God’s saving initiative. The wisdom of God is freely given to those who seek it with sincerity, and reach for it through perseverance. Though we are limited in many ways, God gives us the necessary help to rise above the boundaries of the material world and into the sphere of divine wisdom which orients our life towards its true goal - eternal happiness. In spite of the limits and frailty of our flesh, divine wisdom is accessible because of the image of God which has been imprinted on us.

Seeking divine wisdom differentiates us from those who are governed purely by the concerns and inclinations of this world. To many, divine wisdom is foolishness, but in

the eyes of the truly wise it is more precious than any priceless pearl. While the wisdom of the world defines a good life on the basis of social importance through the exercise of power in rivalry, the wisdom of God defines a good life on the basis of being able to relate well with people. This thinking was the basis of the appeal St. Paul's made to Philemon. Equality and forgiveness are pursued by those who possess divine wisdom and they lead to harmonious living.

Divine wisdom leads to setting the right priorities in life. The life of an authentic Christian involves making Jesus our first priority. Jesus must be placed before everything else. To place Jesus first means making Jesus the point of reference in all we do. It is a call to be ready to renounce all that weakens our commitment to Christ and to follow him, even in suffering. The divine wisdom teaches that when we embrace weakness, we gain tranquillity, even to the point of being dignified when we are humiliated. The world might consider us failures when we pursue this kind of wisdom. But the crown of eternal happiness awaits us who persevere in the pursuit and practice of this wisdom.

Finally, we attain divine wisdom when we follow Jesus in all sincerity and remain connected to him at all times. We must be aware of the cost of following Jesus so that we may not be overwhelmed by the various experiences that undermine our loyalty to him. To follow Jesus is to

make tough choices, set priorities, embrace suffering, and renounce greed. It also means our values must be consistent with our choices, desires and needs. This is the way of the wise in the eyes of God and this leads to lasting happiness. Astronauts pursue scientific wisdom in order to navigate the skies to reach their goals, in a similar way authentic Christians must pursue divine wisdom to navigate the skies of life in all its progress and turbulence to reach lasting happiness, salvation.

Proverb

“If you are filled with pride, then you will have no room for wisdom.”

Action

Self-examination

Am I ready to let go of my earthly securities so that I may acquire lasting happiness by following Christ in purposeful suffering?

Do I relate with my brethren on the basis of social classification or on the fact that we have equal dignity in Christ?

Response to God

I will review what I consider the supreme value and worth of my life, so that, if it does not correspond to the dictates of God's wisdom, I may seek God guidance through prayer.

Response to your World

I will re-establish contacts with persons I had considered as not being worthy of my attention in the past.

As a group, we will organize a program to help us get into contact with the marginalized in our community so as to share our spiritual and material resources with them.

Prayer

All powerful Father, the source of divine wisdom, we thank you for making it possible for us to have access to your treasury of wisdom. Graciously grant us the grace to resist the allurements of the world so that we may rely solely on your ways of approaching life. May you endow us with the spirit of perseverance so that we may be able to withstand the mockery of the world on account of our choices. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your son, who invites us to follow in him closely in renouncing the world with its apparent happiness, he who lives and reigns forever and ever. Amen.