

Readings for Sunday the 17th Week of the Year

FIRST READING: 1 Kings 3:5, 7-12

A reading from the first Book of Kings:

The LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream at night. God said, "Ask something of me and I will give it to you." Solomon answered: "O LORD, my God, you have made me, your servant, king to succeed my father David; but I am a mere youth, not knowing at all how to act. I serve you in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a people so vast that it cannot be numbered or counted. Give your servant, therefore, an understanding heart to judge your people and to distinguish right from wrong. For who is able to govern this vast people of yours?" The LORD was pleased that Solomon made this request. So God said to him: "Because you have asked for this, not for a long life for yourself, nor for riches, nor for the life of your enemies, but for understanding so that you may know what is right, I do as you requested. I give you a heart so wise and understanding that there has never been anyone like you up to now, and after you there will come no one to equal you."

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 119:57, 72, 76-77, 127-128, 129-130

Lord, I love your commands.

I have said, O Lord, that my part is to keep your words. The law of your mouth is to me more precious than thousands of gold and silver pieces.

Lord, I love your commands.

Let your kindness comfort me according to your promise to your servants. Let your compassion come to me that I may live, for your law is my delight.

Lord, I love your commands.

For I love your command more than gold, however fine. For in all your precepts I go forward; every false way I hate.

Lord, I love your commands.

Wonderful are your decrees; therefore I observe them. The revelation of your words sheds light, giving understanding to the simple.

Lord, I love your commands.

SECOND READING: Romans 8:28-30

A reading from the Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans:

Brothers and sisters: We know that all things work for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, so that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those he predestined he also called; and those he called he also justified; and those he justified he also glorified.

The word of the Lord.

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew:

Jesus said to his disciples: "The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure buried in a field, which a person finds and hides again, and out of joy goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant searching for fine pearls. When he finds a pearl of great price, he goes and sells all that he has and buys it. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net thrown into the sea, which collects fish of every kind. When it is full they haul it ashore and sit down to put what is good into buckets. What is bad they throw away. Thus it will be at the end of the age. The angels will go out and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth. "Do you understand all these things?" They answered, "Yes." And he replied, "Then every scribe who has been instructed in the kingdom of heaven is like the head of a household who brings from his storeroom both the new and the old."

The Gospel of the Lord

Reflection for Sunday the 17th Week of the Year

When I was still in grammar school while facing tests and reluctant to study, I would resort to an ancient yet faulty tradition when it came to scholarly pursuits. I would pray. I prayed to the Holy Spirit for the Wisdom of Solomon. Unfortunately, this course of action, which is grounded, firmly in human behavior, rarely works. The custom is also based on exactly the meaning and source of Solomon's wisdom. In the bible, those who are wise are the ones who hear, understand, integrate and then do God's will.

Even the way I prayed was faulty. Listen carefully to how Solomon prayed and exactly for what he prayed. His opening to prayer is an honest appraisal of who he was. He was king only because God made him king. He acknowledged that any authority and power came from God and not him. He also did not pray directly for wisdom. He also admitted his ineptness because of his youth. Instead he prayed for an understanding heart and to be able to distinguish right from wrong. Like biblical wisdom, understanding was a bit nuanced. The word for it means the same as listening and obedience. His motives were to serve God through service to the people as king.

Invariably whenever I have been in a classroom as a student or in the rare occasion as a teacher, there was always at least one person who could parrot back all the information being taught. Some could mistake the acquisition of knowledge as wisdom. Knowing facts and repeating them back does not guarantee wisdom. How one can use the information is more of an indication of, at least, practical wisdom. Using what one knows and has learned from experience leads to a creative synthesis.

From this passage, one would think that God's wisdom gifted Solomon to be an ideal king. I always recommend that Catholics read the bible stories. Most of us have had a built-in refusal to do so. Five hundred years ago people first began to read the bible. They began to read the bible because the printing press with interchangeable type was invented in the late 1400s. As people read the bible, people began to notice that there were discrepancies in what the priests taught and what the bible actually said. This led those who thought more freely from institutional doctrine to protest. The protestations led to division. The protesters were called Protestants. The divisive movement we call the Protestant Reformation. The Church remains divided today.

The motto of many Protestant churches is, "Sola Scriptura," only scripture. For five hundred years Protestant Christians have been encouraged to read the bible whereas Catholics, for the past five hundred years, have been discouraged to read them. Catholics were to rely on the priests to interpret the scriptures to them. In the 1940s that changed. It is less than eighty years that Catholic Christians

have been encouraged to read scripture. Hopefully, the teaching and preaching of us priests have taken the discrepancies to heart. We as Catholics have two sources of Revelation. We hold that both Scripture and Tradition bring to us God's Word. Tradition is rooted in Scripture and in the lived experience of the Church. Our personal reluctance to read the bible is offset by the amount of scripture we read at mass. Every weekday we read three bible passages. On Sundays and major feast days we read four.

Solomon, we can read, was far from the ideal king. Yes, he built the first temple of Jerusalem. It became God's house. Originally God lived with, in and through God's people. God's true home was within the people of Israel. The temple actually set limits on God imposed by a king. To build the temple took a great deal of money and people's labor. Solomon taxed the nation and conscripted laborers to do so. He had many foreign wives who worshiped gods other than God. Thus Solomon introduced the worship of idols into Hebrew society. One can ask; did Solomon follow God's will or his own? Exactly what was the gift of Wisdom and Understanding that God Gave Solomon? Did Solomon abandon the gift and follow his own ego?

God promised that no one would have as much wisdom and understanding again. I have to ask, what about Jesus? Jesus is God's son, the second person of the Holy Trinity, the Word by whom all was created and is God himself. Jesus is also fully human in all but sin. Solomon sinned as he diverged from doing God's will. In doing that, Solomon showed his lack of wisdom. Jesus always did the Father's will. Jesus served God's people to the point of dying in our place on the cross. Jesus received the perfection of Wisdom. There has not been one like Jesus since he ascended back to God. We seek God's wisdom as we seek to do God's will. In trying to be Christ-like we live the words of Jesus' prayer, "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done..."

Do all things really work for good for those who love God? Tradition tells us that Paul himself was beheaded for loving God. All of us love God, I presume. A pandemic infects and kills people all over the world. Protest against prejudice has led to civil unrest. People resist simple directions to keep one another safe from COVID 19. We seem to be surrounded by sinners! We are all sinners, in fact.

Wearing a mask, keeping a safe distance apart and avoiding congregating in groups are not impossible things to do. We all know what is right and wrong, like Solomon. Yet we find doing what's right so difficult. Years ago these initials began cropping up all over, "WWJD." When I first saw them, I thought they could be the call letters of a new radio station or the name of a new doomsday movie, "World War Judgment Day." It meant neither. It stands for a simple question that all of us can ask, "What Would Jesus Do?" Like the opening words of the Our Father, they can become a path to Biblical Wisdom; seeking God's will and doing it.

Paul did not have a comfortable life. His story began as he participated in the killing of Steven, the first martyr. Paul was beaten, shipwrecked, imprisoned and stoned (with actual rocks not with spirits on ice). People feared his conversion to Jesus to be false. He faced derision as he preached in some locales. He was not always a pleasant person. He is now a saint. English is the only language I know that has a word "Saint." In all other languages the word means "Holy." To be consistent, Holy Paul would be linguistically correct.

Did Paul mean all things work to dying or martyred for those who love God? In some sense the answer is yes. Eternal life, life forever with God, is our true goal. However, I am always cautious not to fall into the trap of Carl Marx. He said that if this life is so rotten and brief and all await going to heaven when we escape it and die, religion is and opiate that prevents social change. I believe that Paul meant things work to Good now amidst turmoil, suffering and death. What is good now? It may be as simple as having a slice of pizza after four months or getting a phone call from a friend. It may also come from struggling to change one's attitudes and preconceptions of others. It may come from a sense of working to the

common good by wearing a mask in public, keeping one's hands clean and keeping six feet apart from others.

Jesus parables are ambiguous. They always reflect life's ambiguity. They are lessons in how our struggle to find meaning in life is real. There five separate parables in this gospel. The first two parables are parallel stories; so are the second two. There is a bit of a conundrum with the two treasures. If the treasure was already mine, I wouldn't have to buy it. Like insider trading, buying it would be unjust. What is the treasure? Is it outside of me? Is it part of me already? Perhaps those questions are irrelevant. Perhaps the point of those two parables is the total commitment to the goal. Jesus is with us until the end of the age. Jesus will return even though he's here. The Spirit has entered my life. Yet I still strive to discern the Spirit. God has given us the gift of Faith. Still with each prayer, each good act we do can move us more deeply into our relationship with God. Perhaps living in the present, now and anticipating what will yet come is at the heart of these two stories. God is the eternal now and we live now, not our past or our future. We are bound by this life in time. Our movement to God is inexorable. The stories imply a total commitment to our journey.

The next two parables symbolize a life of varied experiences. Some we like; others we dislike. We can do well; we can make mistakes. We wish that pandemic and prejudice will disappear. We know they will not. We hope that God will guide the researchers and testers of treatment and vaccine for COVID 19 to success. We hope that the Holy Spirit will change our hearts. Only God's grace can turn us toward one another. Only God's Grace can inspire and give strength to those who work diligently for a cure. In the process of change and discovery we seek God's presence.

During these four months I've spent a lot of time by myself. More importantly, I have spent a lot of time with myself. I'm of an age when I have more past than future. I have lived a life of much experience. I've made many mistakes. Many people have been part of my life and have gone. The old Paul Anka song that Frank Sinatra sang, "My Way," never got it right. I have never had control. Sometimes Murphy's Law and Zilch's Principle reign supreme. Murphy said, "Anything that can happen will happen." Zilch has said, "Affecting the most people and occurring at the most inopportune time." The one I like best is Paul's Law, which states with certainty, "You can't fall off the floor." For I maintain that Murphy was an optimist.

When I survey my relationships many people have come and gone, through death, neglect, distance or trouble. I could choose to dwell on loss. I cannot. They have enriched my life. I may miss the presence of people I no longer see, touch or hear. What they left in me is still there; they've never left me in that sense. I am a richer person for the time they were part of my life. I am still the richer and grateful in their absence. I have little or no control; I am the recipient of the experience. I have sat, in the presence of God, with my thoughts, memories and prayers sorting through a lifetime of actions, people, events and choices. I can sit like the fisherman or the angels sorting through experiences. Instead of putting in buckets what's good and throwing away what's bad, I can sit and embrace it all because these things have led to who I am now. With God's grace the pains, joys, triumphs and disappointments have been a gift. Last week both weeds and wheat were the bounty of the harvest. The weeds became fuel to bake the bread. This week I do not hear judgment or condemnation.

There is a fifth parable in the gospel too. I can sit, like the head of my household who can enjoy what is in my storeroom; all the experience of a lifetime. I really do believe Paul's keen observation. Loving God leads to the good.

When we seek the world to change, we seek disappointment. The world doesn't change, for the good, by itself. Watching the news shows us that. We change. That is the point of Solomon's prayer, Paul's

preaching, the point of the Psalm and Jesus' promise of the Kingdom of God. The world will change one person at a time as each of us seeks to know and do God's will.

I pray that you are well and thriving. Let us keep one another save.

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