

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C

Wisdom 9:13-18b

The full title of this work is “The Book of the Wisdom of Solomon.” It was probably written about 50 B.C. and addressed to Jews living in Egypt where the people were so impressed by Hellenistic learning and civilization that their faith was in danger.⁶ This last book of the Old Testament was written many centuries after the time of Solomon.⁵ While it was not written by King Solomon, the title was not meant to deceive anyone, but to express the author’s admiration for Solomon and to claim to be his disciple and imitator of his wisdom.¹⁷ The writer was probably a pious Jew, loyal to the law. He had a good education and his purpose was to build up the faith of his Jewish readers and to support the traditional faith against developments of science and free thinking, reminding his readers of the nobility of their religion in comparison with that of their pagan neighbors.⁵ This selection is part of Solomon’s prayer for wisdom. Even before this chapter he recognizes that wisdom is not a human achievement but a gift from God⁷ and his example reminds us that we must ASK for it. In James 1:5 we are also told to ask for wisdom.

13Who can know God’s counsel, or who can conceive what the Lord intends? The answer is “No one!” These questions do not look for information; they are intended to form part of an act of praise.⁵

14For the deliberations of mortals are timid, (uncertain) and unsure are our plans.

15For the corruptible body burdens the soul and the earthen shelter (human body) weighs down the mind that has many concerns. The limitations of human nature make it impossible for us to fully understand the mysteries of God without his help.⁴ These verses stress the limitations of the human mind which is held down by the body. This does not say that the body is evil, but simply recognizes the limitations of human abilities.⁷

16And 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? We struggle to understand even earthly matters; how can we hope to grasp heavenly things? Only the gift of wisdom from God can teach the ways of the Lord.⁷

17Or who ever knew your counsel, except you had given wisdom and sent your holy spirit from on high? Once again the answer is “No one.”⁵ Wisdom, which is identified with the Spirit of the Lord, is a gift from God. Wisdom is the principle of all virtues and the guide of life.¹

18bAnd thus were the paths of those on earth made straight. When God sent wisdom in times past, Israel’s ancestors were saved. It is absolutely necessary, in the author’s mind, for wisdom to be on earth in order for human beings to live correctly.⁵ Philosophers can attain lofty heights but they cannot come to the full knowledge of God’s designs through their own efforts. Not all wisdom is true for there is false wisdom (natural human wisdom), which is subject to illusions, lies, and errors, since it flows from the human heart, which is afflicted with the capacity for such things. Only he to whom God sends His Holy Spirit can attain to true wisdom that is pure and genuine for God’s plan is fully revealed in Christ alone.²

Philemon 9b-10, 12-17

This letter was written by Paul probably during his first Roman imprisonment where he lived under house arrest from 60-62 A.D.¹² This very personal letter to Philemon, a wealthy Christian whom St. Paul had converted to Christianity,⁹ concerns his slave who escaped Philemon’s service and was guilty of theft in the process. In his flight, the slave Onesimus went to Rome and apparently Paul gave him refuge and ultimately converted him to Christianity.⁵ The apostle is now sending him back to Philemon and asking that he be received as a beloved brother in Christ.¹²

9**I, Paul, an old man,** St. Paul, between 50 and 60 years of age, probably figures that as an “old man” he stands a better chance of having his request granted.⁴ **and now also a prisoner for Christ Jesus,** Paul was under house arrest in Rome for the Faith.³

10**urge you on behalf of my child Onesimus, whose father I have become in my imprisonment;** To bring someone to Christ is like giving him a new birth, and that is exactly what Paul did to Onesimus.⁶ Onesimus, the runaway slave, was converted by Paul who looked on him as a spiritual child and Onesimus ended up taking care of Paul during this imprisonment.⁴

12**I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you.** Paul now sends Onesimus back to Philemon; the letter was written to be carried by the runaway slave to his master.⁷

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 wants to keep Onesimus at his side, but he dares not presume upon the kindness of his lawful master, Philemon. It is more honorable that Philemon should give his free consent to Paul’s requests than be compelled by his apostolic authority.¹²

14**but I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that the good you do might not be forced but voluntary.** Here Paul acknowledges the master’s right to the slave.³ Paul also makes the point that when there are difficulties between Christians, a settlement should be sought in a climate of mutual charity.²

15**Perhaps this is why he was away from you for a while, that you might have him back forever,** Since both are now Christians, they are related in a way that not even death can undo.³

16**no longer as a slave but more than a slave,** Baptism removes the barrier of social differences in the esteem and affection which Christians owe one another.² **a brother, beloved especially to me, but even more so to you, as a man and in the Lord.** Paul is asking Philemon, also one of Paul’s converts, to take back his converted runaway slave as a beloved brother. It is quite a request when we realize that slavery was accepted as normal and natural in the world of Paul’s day.³ There were 60,000,000 slaves in the Roman Empire. Slavery was an integral part of the ancient world and the whole of society was built on it.¹¹ In fact, the slave population in Paul’s day outnumbered the population of free citizens. This unbalanced situation was kept under control by Roman law, which made runaway slaves liable to the death penalty.¹² It is on the basis of the slave’s newfound Christian faith, which he now shares with his master, that Paul recommends a new relationship between them. It is asking a lot of a slave owner who could justly charge Paul with a serious crime—harboring a runaway.⁴ Paul is essentially asking him NOT to inflict the severe penalties permitted by law.³

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

Philemon must have done as Paul requested because the Apostle John settled in Ephesus in about 97 A.D. and Warren Carroll writes that John did not become the bishop of Ephesus when Timothy was martyred because his authority as the last of the apostles was unique in the whole church. Rather, Onesimus, Philemon’s runaway slave, became the bishop succeeding Timothy.⁸ It is also considered that he played a major role in the collection of Paul’s letters.³ The fact that Onesimus, the runaway slave, was returned as a brother to Philemon was a powerful statement against slavery.⁶ Due to this teaching slavery gradually died out. The teaching of the Church’s Magisterium has contributed to a growing realization that all workers have innate dignity and rights as men and as sons and daughters of God. In the encyclical “Rerum novarum” Pope Leo XIII called on employers to see that it is truly shameful and inhuman to misuse men as though they were mere things designed just to be used in the pursuit of gain and reminded them of their duties never to look upon workers as their bondsmen but to respect in every man his dignity and worth as a man and a Christian.⁹ Today’s catechism tells us that the seventh commandment forbids acts or enterprises that for any reason lead to the enslavement of human beings, to their being bought, sold and exchanged like merchandise, in disregard for their personal dignity. It is a sin against the dignity of persons

and their fundamental rights to reduce them by violence to their productive value or to a source of profit.¹⁰ (CCC 2414)

Luke 14:25-33

In the previous part of this chapter, Jesus stressed that God's kingdom is open to everyone. Now, speaking to the crowds and not just to the Apostles, he makes clear the demands that the kingdom makes on those who accept his invitation.⁷ He also wishes to impress upon his Jewish listeners the serious fact that their boasted privileges of being children of Abraham and members of the chosen People would count for nothing without the habitual practice of penance and self-denial.¹⁶

25Great crowds were traveling with Jesus, and he turned and addressed them, It is clear that Jesus was addressing the crowd and not the Apostles only and so the renunciation in question pertains to all mankind who would follow Christ and save their souls. God desires the salvation of all men, but the requirements and conditions are severe because the prize is so high and so precious. To attain the rewards of heaven, everyone must be ready to sacrifice, if necessary, every temporal good.¹⁶

26"If anyone comes to me without hating This is a hard term to translate because it is very strong but the most common translation in English is "to love less." It refers to attitude and action, not emotions. The point is not how one feels toward parents and family, but one's effective attitude when it comes to a choice for the kingdom. Not even the sacredness of family loyalty should outweigh our commitment to Christ, since we must be willing to abandon even close relationships to follow him.¹³ his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. St Gregory the Great comments: "In this world let us love everyone, even though he be our enemy; but let us hate him who opposes us on our way to God, though he be our relative." In the end, we must keep things in perspective and God must take priority over everything else! We cannot be half-hearted! We must be always ready to abandon everything for Christ.¹⁴ Nothing and no one must stand in the way of following Christ.⁷ Note that it is the relationships that Jesus holds in the highest regard that he holds up as possible losses for his disciples. It is precisely because Jesus reveres the relationships he mentions that he uses them to assert the cost of discipleship.⁴

27Whoever does not carry his own cross This means to daily endure with love and patience any unavoidable or inevitable burdens which go against our will, our plans, our dreams, our desires. There is a prayer that asks God for the serenity to accept the things that we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference! and come after me cannot be my disciple. The Cross of Christ is both the proof and the expression of His love. It signifies His sacrifice. What love is there that has no need to express itself in the language of sacrifice?²

28Which 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? Discipleship is a serious commitment. A complete surrender to Christ is necessary to complete the tasks of Christian living.¹³ The price of discipleship is high. It requires daily enduring with patience the sufferings, afflictions, and crosses of life.(Luke 14:25-47) Therefore, all who would follow Christ and attain to the eternal salvation must first consider well the conditions and sacrifices on which so great a good depends.¹⁶

29Otherwise, after laying the foundation and finding himself unable to finish the work the onlookers should laugh at him and say,

30'This one began to build but did not have the resources to finish.' It requires money to build a tower or to equip an army as in the next parable—great sacrifices in either case. Likewise, to be a

disciple of Christ means special sacrifice which consists in renouncing everything else that may stand in the way.¹⁶

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. These examples of mere human prudence mean that if a person should try to work out in advance the risks he may run, all the more reason for a Christian to embrace the Cross voluntarily and generously because there is no other way he can follow Jesus.¹⁴

33 In the same way, anyone of you who does not renounce all his possessions cannot be my disciple." Jesus was on his way to the Cross but the crowds thought that he was on his way to an empire. In the most vivid way possible he told them that the man who would follow him was not on the way to worldly power and glory, but must be ready for a loyalty which would sacrifice the dearest things in life and for a suffering which would be like the agony of a man upon a cross.¹⁵

When the Standard Oil tycoon John D. Rockefeller died, someone asked, "How much did he leave behind?" The answer: "All of it!"

Some of the material for this commentary was taken from: (1) Dictionary of the Bible" by John L. McKenzie, S.J., (2) Saint Joseph Commentary on the Sunday Readings Year C" by Achille DeGeest, O.F.M., (3) "The Jerome Biblical Commentary," (4) "Workbook for lectors and gospel readers: 2004" by Aelred R. Rosser, (5) "Collegeville Bible Commentary: WISDOM" by John E. Rybolt, C.M., (6) "The Bread of Life Catholic Bible Study" by Deacon Ken & Marie Finn, (7) "Workbook for lectors and gospel readers: 1998" by Lawrence E. Mick, (8) "The Founding of Christendom: Vol 1" by Warren H. Carroll, (9) "The Navarre Bible: Captivity Epistles," (10) "The Catechism Of The Catholic Church," (11) "The Letters To Timothy, Titus And Philemon" by William Barclay, (12) "Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Letters of St. Paul to the Philipians, Colossians, and Philemon" With Introduction, Commentary, and Notes by Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, (13) "Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Gospel of Luke," With Introduction, Commentary, and Notes by Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, (14) "The Navarre Bible: St. Luke," (15) "The Gospel of Luke" by William Barclay, (16) "The Parables Of Christ" by Charles J. Callan, O.P., and (17) "You Can Understand The Bible by Peter Kreeft".

In loving memory of Peg Schneller, who compiled these commentaries.