

Commentary on Sunday Scripture – Year C

23rd Sunday of Ordinary Time

First reading:

(Wisdom 9.13-18)

In Praise of Divine Wisdom

This lovely passage is the conclusion of Solomon's prayer for heavenly Wisdom, saying that heavenly Wisdom and the true knowledge of the things of God are beyond human grasp. If we cannot penetrate to an understanding of the visible world around us, how can we hope to reach an understanding of the divinity beyond the grasp of all our senses?

The prayer is put in the mouth of King Solomon, who in the Old Testament is almost the personification of human wisdom, but artificially, for the Book of Wisdom was composed at Alexandria only shortly before the birth of Christ. The recognition at this moment that Divine Wisdom lies well beyond the reach of all human faculties is all the more impressive in view of the achievements of the great philosophical schools of Alexandria.

Such occasional poems, scattered through the Wisdom Books of the Old Testament, are a valuable reminder that God is beyond all human comprehension in wisdom, strength and beauty. Perhaps the most beautiful and overwhelming of all is the experience of God conveyed in the poems of Job 38-41. These poems may also be seen as praise of the Wisdom of God which will become flesh and be manifest to us in Christ Jesus.

Question:

'Of what we cannot speak, it is better to keep silent.' Is this true of God?

Second reading:

(Philemon 9b-10, 12-17)

Paul and Philemon

Paul's letter to Philemon - and this reading makes up about half the letter - is a friendly little note from Paul to Philemon about a slave of Philemon's called Onesimus, who has been serving Paul in his imprisonment, and has become a Christian. There are two theories as to why Onesimus was with Paul: either Onesimus ran away from his master and took refuge with Paul, or Philemon lent Onesimus to Paul for a limited period. In either case, Paul is now sending Onesimus back, and, at the same time, pressurizing Philemon to send him Onesimus for a further period. The most important and attractive element in the Letter is Paul's affectionate brotherhood with the slave, now a Christian.

After long centuries of the toleration of slavery within Christianity, Christians will realize that the affection and brotherhood here expressed make slavery among Christians intolerable. A further step taken later will be that any enslavement of human beings is incompatible with Christianity, and that all human beings must be treated as brothers and sisters, equal before the Lord. It is a classic case of the slow deepening of the understanding of Christian morality.

Question:

And what about the position of women in Christianity?

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Gospel:

(Luke 14.25-33)

The Cost of Discipleship

Jesus does not pull his punches, and here delivers a series of devastating body blows to anyone who is looking for easy discipleship. All through this journey up to Jesus' own death at Jerusalem, the cost of discipleship has been a recurrent theme: 'Let the dead bury their dead' (thirteenth Sunday), the Parable of the Rich Fool (eighteenth Sunday), 'From one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded' (nineteenth Sunday), 'Father against son, son against father' (twentieth Sunday), and now 'Hate father and mother' and 'Give up all your possessions'. A certain amount of the vigour of these demands may be attributed to a Semitic mode of expression, ease of superlatives and lack of comparatives, but there is no doubt about the absolute demands made on the disciple. When Jesus made these demands he knew what lay ahead of him and he was only asking his disciples to follow his own course. We must count the cost before beginning to build the tower. Most of us have, of course, already started to build the tower. There is no turning back from the plough (thirteenth Sunday), only prayer for a courage and loyalty which exceed our own powers.

Question:

Does Jesus really mean we must hate father and mother?
