

Commentary on Sunday Scripture – Year A

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

First reading:

(1 Kings 3.5-12)

Solomon's Prayer for Wisdom

How many of our modern politicians and monarchs would do well to imitate this prayer of Solomon as he comes to the throne! He is touchingly conscious of his own inadequacies and inexperience. He does not ask for anything for his own advantage, but just for the skills he needs to rule his people well. In reply, the Lord promises him plenty of material rewards.

Immediately afterwards, as illustration of the wisdom given to him, we have the famous story of 'The Judgment of Solomon', how he settled the dispute between two prostitutes, each claiming as her own the live baby of two, the other of whom had died.

His wisdom became so renowned that several collections of witty and pungent proverbs in the Bible are attributed to him. The Lord made him a canny businessman too, for he built up a fortune as middleman, selling horses from Asia Minor to Egypt, and chariots to go with them from Egypt to Asia Minor, as well as mining the minerals of the land. No wonder the Queen of Sheba was bowled over! The reading is given here perhaps to pair with the gospel picture of the disciple who in the parables brings out wisdom new and old.

Question:

What gift above all would you ask from God?

Second reading:

(Romans 8.28-30)

Moulded to the Image of his Son

It is time for Paul to start summing up the benefits of the Spirit he has detailed in this chapter. In his excitement, he switches to high rhetoric, using a triple chain figure which he uses also elsewhere in his exalted conclusions: 'destined - called, called - justified, justified - glorified'.

The content about which he is justifiably so excited is that God's chosen ones are moulded to the image, shape or pattern of his Son. Not merely co-heirs but conformed. To underline this assimilation to Christ, Paul uses every metaphor he can find: con-crucified with Christ, con-buried with him, con-risen with him, congruent with him. Living with Christ's life, moulded to the pattern of Christ, the Christian takes on Christ's history as his or her own.

This is the personal aspect of being plunged into Christ's death at baptism. The community aspect will be explored in the letters to the quarrelsome community at Corinth: as all Christians live with Christ's life, Christians form one single body, vivified by the same life-giving Spirit, and therefore must help and serve one another as members of the same body, each contributing a different gift, one being an ear, one an eye, one a hand.

Question:

How would you explain to a non-Christian the Pauline idea that the Christian lives with Christ's life?

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Gospel:

(Matthew 13.44-52)

Treasures New and Old

Three final pictures this week from Matthew's collection of Jesus' images of the Christian community. Matthew likes pairs of parables: the dragnet pairs with last week's dandelion parable, the treasure pairs with the pearl. The Kingdom is an exciting and unexpected treasure that can change our whole life, like winning the pools or the lottery - except that God's gifts change us only for the good, and fill our lives with meaning and joy. Of course, we know that God's call is demanding: you've got to pay a price for the field in which the treasure lies, or the genuine pearl found in a junk shop.

The very last picture - the householder bringing down different food packets, pots and jars off the shelf - is encouraging, too: some are old favourites (perhaps the Christian values and prayers we inherited from our families), but some also add new flavours, which we have discovered or been taught ourselves. If we listen, the Spirit is always there to show us new ways of living out our Christian call, an opportunity for prayer or help or service. This 'householder' is often thought to be Matthew's own secret signature: he brings out old and new in the Christian message.

Question:

Which is your favourite among all these images?
