

23rd Sunday Ordinary Time Year “C” *The deliberations of mortals are timid.*
September 8, 2013
Readings: Wisdom 9:13-18; Philemon 9-10, 12-17; Luke 14:25-33

The readings selected by the Church for Mass today give us a rare glimpse into some of the lesser-known portions of the Bible. This is the only time that we ever hear from the Letter to Philemon during the three-year cycle, and one of only two times this year we read from the Book of Wisdom, possibly the last book written in the Old Testament. By the time the book was written, (in Greek not Hebrew) possibly in the 1st Century B.C., Greek ideas had exerted their influence across the ancient near east.

Earthly wisdom was highly sought after and valued, but there existed a new individualistic mentality, some skepticism and dissatisfaction with traditional ideas, a sort of crisis of faith for the sizeable number of Jews who lived there. Our author was surely inspired by the Holy Spirit, but he sought to help his fellow Jews **preserve their precious faith in tough times**. He knew full well that what he wrote was antithetical to the prevailing attitudes of the time:

And scarce do we guess the things on earth, and what is within our grasp we find with difficulty...Who can know God's counsel, or who can conceive what the Lord intends? For the deliberations of mortals are timid..."

Indeed they are timid, and at times we are very confused in our thinking. We need help from above. The author made the all-important distinction between the wisdom of human beings and the wisdom that can only come from God. This wisdom from above is needed in a very particular way now, as our nation faces enormous decisions regarding military intervention in an ancient biblical land immersed in a horrible civil war. We learn in a passage from the Acts of the Apostles that “it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called Christians.”

The biblical Antioch, (in modern day Turkey) is but 12 miles from the Syrian border. In Christ's time it was called Antioch in Syria, and the Euphrates river runs through it. Modern Syria's borders were fixed after World War I. It gained independence in 1946. Syria is about the size of the state of Washington and has 22 million inhabitants. It is extremely diverse, ethnically and religiously, and this is part of the problem. It is an ancient civilization in which Christians have been living since biblical times, and yet who are now outnumbered significantly by Sunni Muslims. ¹

Syria is in the middle of an extremely violent civil war, brought about in part by the changes taking place in the surrounding region in 2011, the so-called Arab Spring. President Assad responded brutally to quell any such attempts to oust him from power and a civil war ensued. At first it looked like the regime was losing to the rebels, but things have changed.

In a letter to the President, Cardinal Dolan and Bishop Pates (in their respective capacities as President of the USCCB and chair of the conference's committee on International Justice and Peace, wrote: "We ask the United States to work urgently and tirelessly with other governments to obtain a ceasefire, initiate serious negotiations, provide impartial humanitarian assistance, and encourage efforts to build an inclusive society in Syria that protects the rights of all its citizens, including Christians and other minorities."

Christians have long been an important minority in Syria, composing roughly 10 percent of the population of 22.5 million. The majority is Greek Orthodox, followed by Catholics, the Assyrian Church of the East, and various groups of Protestants. ²

¹ Washington Post article by Max Fisher, "Nine Questions about Syria You Were Afraid to Ask," 29 August 2013

² John L. Allen Jr., NCR online article 15 July 2013, "Shadow war targets Christians in Syria."

The situation in Syria is tragic, with over 100,000 people already having been killed, and the use of chemical weapons more recently, appears to be beyond any question. Some believe passionately that we cannot turn our backs on the victims of these attacks; yet, in a sincere attempt to stop the atrocities, matters could become worse.

Christians have been treated better in Syria under Assad, just as they were in Iraq under the brutal Saddam Hussein, because these secular Muslim leaders held the extremists at bay. Since Saddam Hussein was deposed, half the Christians have left Iraq, and millions of Syrians have fled. Just yesterday, an Islamist Al-Qaeda linked rebel group seized control of the heavily Christian town of Ma'loula, Syria, a village of 3,000 that is the site of Catholic and Orthodox monasteries, is one of three villages in which Aramaic, the language of Christ, is still spoken. What will become of them? Intervention leads to a horrible choice. Whom are we supporting?

St. Augustine once wrote: "I believe, in order to understand; and I understand, the better to believe."³ In this critical time, we beg from God the wisdom from above to guide our decisions, recognizing that the "deliberations of mortals are timid," and begging strength to know the truth and to follow through on our convictions.

Our Gospel today says that we are told to take up our cross daily and follow Christ. Discipleship carries with it responsibilities and human wisdom, despite its power, still differs from divine wisdom in nature, not only in degree. When we are responsive to the gift of the Holy Spirit, the gift of Wisdom (which we receive in a full manner at Confirmation), then we may say with Saint Paul in the reading to Philemon, that we are ambassadors of Christ, ready to do our part to spread the peaceful Good News of Jesus Christ, knowing that true Wisdom comes from above and ultimately returns there.

³ St. Augustine, *Sermo* 43,7,9