

23rd Sunday Ordinary Time Year “C” *The deliberations of mortals are timid.*
September 7-8, 2019
Cathedral of Saint Paul
Readings: Wisdom 9:13-18; Philemon 9-10, 12-17; Luke 14:25-33

Today we are afforded a rare glimpse into some of the lesser known books of the Bible. This is the only time that we ever hear from the very brief Letter to Philemon during the entire three-year Sunday cycle. It is unusual both for its brevity and because it concerns a slave from Colossae, who perhaps after having committed a theft had run away. He was converted to Christ Jesus by the example of Saint Paul.

Paul asks Philemon to take him back and to treat him, not as a slave, but as a brother in Christ. Sadly, slavery was accepted in the 1st century. Yet, Paul presents Onesimus as “brother, beloved...to me, but even more so to you.” It is a plea for mercy and understanding and a sign that human dignity must be recognized.

We all share a common human dignity, regardless of socio-economic class. Though first century slavery was not based upon race, most were foreigners, indicating a total lack of respect for the equal dignity of all, created in God’s image. This single chapter epistle highlights this amidst a topic that is admittedly extremely difficult to digest and process.

Today is also one of only three times this year we read from the Book of Wisdom, a fascinating and thought-provoking reflection. It will be helpful to understand the background of Wisdom, in order to fully appreciate the strength of its words.

This was possibly the last book written in the Old Testament. By the time it was written (in Greek, not the typical Hebrew), the birth of Jesus was near, and Greek ideas and thoughts had exerted their influence across the ancient near east. Alexandria in Egypt, the probable home of our author, was the intellectual and scientific center of the Mediterranean world.

Earthly wisdom was highly sought after and valued, but there existed a new individualistic mentality, combined with skepticism towards traditional ideas. This created a crisis of faith for the sizeable number of Jews who lived there. Our author was inspired by the Holy Spirit and sought to help his fellow Jews **preserve their precious faith.**

He knew that what he wrote was antithetical to the prevailing attitudes of the time. *Who can know God's counsel, or who can conceive what the Lord intends? For the deliberations of mortals are timid...*" This could not have made him a very popular man in Alexandria, Egypt! He is making the all-important distinction between the wisdom of human beings and that which can only come from God.

When the author of Wisdom shares that the "deliberations of mortals are timid," he is not trying to be an anti-intellectual. Contrary to the words of a one-time Minnesota governor, organized religion is not "a sham and a crutch for weak-minded people who need strength in numbers."¹

We were given minds by God, and so we must use them. We have a sacred duty to put them to use for His greater glory. We also need to be open to the fact that discipleship carries with it responsibilities and that human wisdom, incredible as it may be, differs from divine wisdom in nature not only in degree.

Today, my best advice is for faithful Catholics to concentrate their efforts on living the authentic Faith of the Church. Do not be distracted; focus on the basics. Live the faith in your homes, your families and at school.

The wisdom of God consists in contemplating the realities of the world through personal experience and in so doing, directing all things back to their source in God, and thus putting on the mind of Christ. It is a gift because we can only think with the mind of Christ as a response to His grace moving us to do so.

¹ Gov. Jesse Ventura, in an interview with Playboy Magazine Sept. 30, 1999

Our Gospel reminds us that in order to be a follower of Christ we must take up our cross daily and follow Christ. It makes little sense to speak about going the extra mile, if we are unwilling to even go the required distance.

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 Good News, knowing that true Wisdom comes from above and ultimately returns there to its source.