Spirituality
Scripture for Life

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There was a time when Catholic popular piety promised that in addition to regular Mass attendance and annual confession, wearing a scapular, making the nine First Fridays or collecting an adequate number of plenary indulgences were good investments in eternal life insurance. Lighting candles and praying for the souls in purgatory worked like today's supplementary policies.

Those practices might have been like what the fellow in today's Gospel was looking for when he asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus responded with the core demands of their tradition in relation to others: Do no harm and respect your elders. We might interpret this response as a way of saying, "If you want an inheritance, live as a faithful member of the family."

When the fellow said he had all that covered, Jesus admired his zeal and invited him to up the ante to the absolute limit. This was no suggestion of praying an extra psalm each day or wearing a religious symbol. Offering him the invitation of his life, Jesus said, in essence: "Drop every other ambition, free yourself from all ties, distribute what you have to the neediest and join us on the road." The poor guy was stunned. The word Mark uses for his reaction describes a sudden storm.

Mark tells us that the seeker went his way in mourning. This may be the only Gospel encounter that left both Jesus and the person who came to him unhappy.

Jesus turned to his disciples and, rather than criticize the departing seeker, he drew on his ample store of Hebrew hyperbole and explained that it's easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle than for a wealthy person to enter the kingdom of God. The image was enough to break the tension. Jesus then reminded them that things they were absolutely incapable of accomplishing are astoundingly possible with God.

Hearing that, Peter chimed in on behalf of the group and said that they had given up everything to follow him. Instead of mentioning their persistent jockeying for power and willingness to disregard "unimportant" people, Jesus reassured them that those who risked everything for him and the Gospel would receive far more than they could have imagined — in fact, God would stretch their hearts and minds so they could become family with people far beyond the boundaries of their current concepts of kin and community. Jesus seemed to be telling them, "You are good camels on your way to the needle. Now let God reshape you for what is to come."

Jesus didn't invite everyone to join his itinerant ministry. Most of his followers, like Martha, Mary and Lazarus, lived the values of God's kingdom without leaving home and were every bit if not more faithful than the women and men disciples who traveled with Jesus. But there was a small group whom Jesus invited to join him in a radically free lifestyle defined only by consecration to God and willingness to go anywhere and do everything possible to announce the coming kingdom of God in deed and word. Biblical scholar and Immaculate Heart of Mary Sr. Sandra Schneiders cites them as the

forerunners of today's women and men religious, the members of that unique Christian institution of apostolic religious communities. In Prophets in their Own Country, she describes the disciples and religious as part of a movement which calls people together to live "the two great commandments ... love of God with one's whole being and love of all human beings as oneself" in a lifestyle which includes renunciation of family and home, personal economic dispossession and interdependence, and prophetic obedience in mission. It is not for everyone, and, as today's Gospel demonstrates, not everyone invited accepts it.

As he does with every disciple, Jesus offered the seeker in today's Gospel more than he expected. Looking on him with love, Jesus appreciated his potential and called it forth. Pope Francis speaks of this in the apostolic exhortation, Gaudete et Exsultate. He encourages Christians to allow the grace of baptism to bear fruit in the holiness each is uniquely called to develop. He says, "The important thing is that each believer discern ... that they bring out the very best of themselves, the most personal gifts that God has placed in their hearts" (#11).

Today's Gospel reminds us that every Christian is called to participate in Jesus' mission. That call is personal and unique, tailored to the gifts and needs of each person. Each is free to accept or reject it. It calls forth much more than praying an extra psalm or wearing a scapular. At the same time, we are never called to the impossible — but rather to be open to what is possible with the help of God. With Peter and the gang, we are all invited to accept being camels on the way to becoming more than we can imagine.

WISDOM 7:7-11

According to the New American Bible, the Book of Wisdom was written to edify oppressed Jews who were suffering at the hands of non-believers, including some of their own co-religionists who had abandoned the faith. The author, sometimes taking on the identity of Solomon, used the best of popular religious traditions to buoy up his community. Today's selection presents itself as Solomon's hymn to wisdom.

The six verses preceding our selection present Solomon's reflection on his own life. He says that no matter how great his power and fame, he was born in blood like all others, laid on the same earth, and he will leave the earth like any other human being. With all that modesty and self-knowledge, he goes on to say that he prayed for wisdom — or, his admirers might say, for additional wisdom.

In his wisdom, Solomon humbly admits that God is the source of his gifts and that he received them because he prayed for them. Wisdom is so vital to him that he personifies her as a beloved woman. Then, with an eye to his people tempted to denigrate their own traditions, Solomon goes on to praise wisdom in ways that show her superiority to the Greek goddess Isis.

Solomon then assesses the values of the culture that surround him and declares that he prefers wisdom to power and wealth. Gold and precious gems are nothing more than sand and mud compared to wisdom. Going even further, he adds that he prefers wisdom to the advantages of health and a striking appearance.

In the final verse of our reading, Solomon claims that all good things came to him in Wisdom's company. This is a conclusion that Benjamin Franklin could have written and could quickly be mistaken for the gospel of prosperity: Solomon received the riches he had eschewed because he sought divine wisdom above all else. As we hear in the Gospel, Jesus teaches that one who takes the road to the kingdom of God must continue to give everything away and thus move unencumbered by the things and relationships that could divert them from their true goal. Wisdom is a gift of God that promises a rich life, but the Gospel never equates that with material prosperity.

PSALMS 90:12-13, 14-15, 16-17

Psalm 90 is formally a lament but our refrain and the way the psalm reflects on the first reading change the tone. The refrain could almost be used as a prayerful summary of the reading from Wisdom. The request "Fill us with your love," is a plea for God's hesed, a word usually translated as "loving-kindness." The Anchor Bible Dictionary explains that hesed is the sort of love experienced in an unequal relationship in which one is uniquely able to help and the other is in real need. God's hesed is always freely given; it cannot be coerced and is offered with no expectation of repayment. Although the request is not the same as the request for wisdom, that specific plea will come in the first verse of the psalm.

Verse 12 expresses the desire for wisdom with the well-thought-out request, “Teach us to number our days aright.” That could well have been the request the man of today’s Gospel made to Jesus, saying in effect: “Teach us how to live in your kingdom each and every day.”

In addition to the plea for God’s loving-kindness, the second verse seeks a new kind of wisdom. “Make us glad, for the days when you afflicted us,” articulates the desire to understand the salvific dimension of the difficult times of our lives and adds retrospect to the prayer to number our days aright.

The final verse echoes Solomon asking that our work be fruitful. Prayed in light of the Gospel, it can show others the joy of living in the kingdom of God.

HEBREWS 4:12-13

The two verses of this reading invite a meditation on God’s word in the scriptural tradition. Our introduction to the word of God comes from Genesis in which God’s living and effective word is not simply a sound, but a vibrant creative power. God spoke and it happened. That is its efficacy.

The word of God is also living. In one sense that indicates that the word is a personification of God, an idea that we can grasp when we consider the word as God’s self-revelation. Just as we meet one another with words, just as verbal communication can unite us even when distance separates us, so the word of God is a living revelation of God’s presence and activity among us.

Having said that, the pastor/author of Hebrews goes on to talk about the activity of God’s word. All the metaphors and images here point to the idea of the power of God’s word in effect as well affect.

In regard to being effective, the reading is reminiscent of Isaiah 55 which proclaims that, like rain and snow, the word of God accomplishes its purpose. One expression of the word’s affective dimension is the idea that it penetrates soul and spirit, joints and marrow. In other words, as it comes to a person it can enter into the most hidden recesses of a personality. It is not simply a sound or even a conveyor of meaning, but perhaps might be better compared to music which stirs the soul even as it may also articulate an intelligible message.

Another dimension of the power of the word as a personification is that no one is truly invulnerable to it. Like it or not, the word comes as a revelation of one’s interior state, even if that is limited to rejection of God. The word judges because it calls to what is deepest in a person and calls each one to stand in the presence of God. Thus, with no need to accuse or condemn from outside, its judgment is a revelation about the truth of the person.

This reading leads us to ask how we have allowed God’s word to come into our heart and soul. Like Psalm 139, it is a reminder that God is ever present to us, inviting us to be more present to both ourselves and God. While that may seem terrifying, today’s psalm has prepared us for the encounter with the peace-filled invitation, “Fill us with your love, O Lord, and we will sing for joy.”

MARK 10:17-30

Mark presents this three-part incident occurring “as Jesus was setting out on a journey.” He says that to remind us that Jesus is on the road to Jerusalem and the climax of the Gospel. At the same time, we might wonder why the man put off this encounter until Jesus was leaving the area. Was he indecisive about what he had heard of/from Jesus but took a last-ditch chance to ask his question? Was he afraid of what he might hear? Whatever his reason for stopping Jesus on the road, he approached him with the utmost respect, running to him and kneeling as would a slave awaiting his master’s command.

Then comes the curious interlude about true goodness. Declining the label “good,” Jesus’ response can be translated as “No one is good except one — God,” a phrasing designed to recall the “Shema” (Deuteronomy 6:4), the prayer devout Jews repeated morning and night as a proclamation of their faith in the one God of Israel. Some exegetes suggest that Jesus started the conversation this way to contravene any assumptions the man or those witnessing the scene might have had about goodness. No human being can presume their own goodness, no matter how many commandments they fulfill. Only God is good, only God makes good.

When Jesus goes on to speak of God's commands, he concentrates on those that deal with justice in human relationships. We should remember that Mark has purposely placed this incident just after Jesus had taught that people have been created for one another and that only those who are willing to depend totally on God are ready to receive the kingdom. The commands Jesus cited specify ways in which people must avoid harming others, concluding with the demand to honor one's parents.

When the man replied that he had observed all those commandments from his youth, Mark says that Jesus looked on him with genuine "agape," that is a preferential love demonstrating that he respected and appreciated him and his authenticity. Jesus saw something in this man that led him to invite him to join his group of itinerant disciples — an invitation that he didn't make every day.

Mark tells us that the man was stunned when Jesus invited him to sell and give all he had to the poor and then to come with him. He may have approached Jesus in sincerity but hadn't bargained for the challenge to give up everything. Perhaps he had heard Jesus' invitation to "repent and believe," but he hadn't comprehended that metanoia conversion implied an inversion of his life. He had once been more than intrigued with the possibilities Jesus offered, but in the en,d all he could do was depart in grief because the cost of going down Jesus' road was too great for him.

Mark allows us to think that Jesus spoke with as much sympathy as disappointment when he said, "How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God." Jesus understood how people can be enslaved by their possessions. He knew how hard it is for anyone to enter the kingdom of God. He had been dealing with similar difficulties with his disciples for whom competition and prestige were stumbling blocks. Therefore, Jesus went on with both humor and sympathy to explain that camels go through the eye of a needle more easily than people learn to be little and dependent enough to trust only in God's plan.

When Peter asserted his claim that the disciples had accepted Jesus' invitation, Jesus gave him credit for it and solemnly promised them greater blessings in the present and the future. (Of course, one had to be in tune with Jesus' values to appreciate the value of the promised blessings!)

Today's readings invite us to consider what we seek most in our life and why we choose to be in the company of Christ and his followers. Christ offers to take all we have and are and transform it as truly as the bread and wine are transformed in our Eucharist. But as we see in today's Gospel, that is simply an offer. We are free to stay on his road or to go our own way.

Planning: 28th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Lawrence Mick

Today's second reading contains a challenge for all of us, planners, presiders, lectors and assembly members. Hebrews insists that "the word of God is living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating even between soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and able to discern reflections and thoughts of the heart."

If that is true, how is it that we proclaim the word of God week after week with so little apparent effect? How is it that so many Christians "hear" God's word but walk out of church largely unchanged? How is it that we proclaim the values of God week after week and most of us continue to live by the values of the world, which are frequently in complete contradiction to God's ways? Why is our proclamation of the word of God so often ineffective? Far from penetrating "between soul and spirit, joint and marrow," it often barely penetrates the consciousness of the assembly.

If the word of God is truly proclaimed with power and truly heard by the assembly, it will change us. If it is not doing so (and much evidence suggests that change is minimal), then God's word is not truly being heard.

There is no magic solution to this failure. Our culture conditions people to ignore any word of the Lord that is discomfiting or that demands change from us. So, we hear the word each week but fail to really listen; or perhaps some listen but then fail to implement the word in daily life.

Some years ago, I was often quite busy conducting intensive workshops with lectors over several weeks in many parishes. There seems to be little call for that today. Is that because all of our lectors do an excellent job and need no further training? If that were so, we should expect that our world would be changing for the better. Or is it because we don't consider the proclamation of the world with power to change us a priority in our parishes?

Planners might spend some time together this week to discern the state of lector training and performance in the parish. Is the word of God always intelligible to the assembly? Does the sound system need improvement? Do the lectors need better training? Does the assembly need to be trained in how to listen better? Is there adequate silence surrounding each reading to allow it to be really heard and taken into the consciousness of the assembly? What further training could help lectors (and presiders) proclaim the word with more power and effectiveness?

Planners might start by simply discussing whether the words of our second reading are true in the parish. Is the word of God "living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword" in your assembly? If not, what can be done?

Prayers: 28th Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Peg Ekerdt

Introduction

We have heard in Scripture that God's ways are not always our human ways. The readings this week pose a challenge to each of us to remain faithful to God's ways — to seek God's wisdom, to hear and embrace God's word and to make God a priority in all of life, resisting the distractions of wealth and possession.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you are the source of wisdom: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you are the living and effective word: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you are the friend and champion of the poor: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider Let us pray for the needs of the church, of this gathered community and for our world.

Minister For the church, for all of us, for courage to embrace Jesus' command: "Go sell what you have and give to the poor," to use our wealth for the sake of the Gospel, we pray:

- For places in our world that suffer violence; for leaders who have the power to defuse human conflict with justice and wisdom; for courage among all to speak what is true and do what is right, we pray:
- With gratitude for the lives of Pope Paul VI and Archbishop Oscar Romero, on this weekend of their canonization, for grace to imitate their wisdom and global commitment to the people of God, we pray:
- For time set aside for the practices of prayer, rooting ourselves in God's transforming word, seeking the gifts of prudence and wisdom, we pray:
- In this month set aside for the respect for all life, for commitment among us to cherish the elderly and care for the unborn, to feed the hungry, welcome the immigrant, and educate children who are our future and our hope, we pray:
- For all the sick of our parish community and for those who care for them; for those who live with addiction or face depression each day; for all who yearn for healing, we pray
- For those who have died this past week, and for the intentions of all gathered here, we pray:

Presider Loving and patient God, fill our stubborn hearts with immeasurable grace as we seek the gift of wisdom and surrender our resistance so we will allow you to be our priority in all we do, think and say. We ask this in the name of Jesus, your Son. Amen.

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