**23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time Year C**

**4th September 2022**

**Reading I: Wisdom 9:13-18**

The author of Wisdom lived a few years before Jesus and his writing shows knowledge of contemporary Greek ideas yet with an independence from them. This may be illustrated by the reading in the Missal.

In Hebrew poetry, it is the ideas that rhyme and not the sounds. Each line is followed by a second line expressing the same idea in other words. So if we take the first two lines of our reading, ‘What man’ is paralleled by ‘Who’ and ‘intentions of God’ by ‘will of the Lord’ In the fifth and sixth lines, the ‘perishable body’ is synonym for ‘tent of clay’ and ‘presses down the soul’ for ‘weighs down the teeming mind’.

The author then expresses the idea that the intentions of God can only be discerned by the help of Wisdom and the Spirit of God. The parallelism here suggests that the two concepts are equivalent. The 'holy spirit' of v. 17 is Wisdom personified and later identified by Christians with the third person of the Trinity.

Our passage insists that no one can arrive at God's counsels without wisdom. God is all-wise and the only source of wisdom. In contrast, compared with the mysteries of the universe, the meaning of history, and the mind of the Creator, people are ignorant.

But, God does not leave humankind in its ignorance and uncertainty but bestows the gift of knowledge. The answer to life's problems is in the hand of God; he is generous with his gift of wisdom to all who humbly ask for it (v. 18).

But Paul can call on the association of 'spirit' with 'wisdom' here to teach that the Spirit communicates that wisdom which is not of this world and that enables those who accept it to understand and appreciate the divine plan (1 Corinthians 2:6-16).

**Responsorial Psalm: 89:3-6, 12-14 & 17**

As with the opening words of the first reading, the first two stanzas of the psalm contrast the difference between God's eternity and human mortality. The second two stanzas (verses 12-14, & 17) ask for God's favour as a compensation for human beings' fleeting life, so that despite their transitoriness their work may prosper. The request for wisdom in verse 12 recalls Solomon's similar request. (I Kings 3;4-15)

**Reading II: Philemon 9b-10, 12-17**

The letter to Philemon is the only personal letter of Paul that has survived. All other letters in the New Testament (except Timothy and Titus) were to be read aloud during the weekly Eucharist and Philemon happened to be bound up with them. It is a standard length that would have just filled one page of papyrus, having the addressee on the other side like a post-card to-day.

Onesimus was a slave who had run away from his master, Philemon. Philemon was a member of the Church in Colossae and had visited Paul during his stay in prison.

Onesimus, meaning ‘Useful’ was a popular name for a slave. Later in the 1st century there was a Bishop called Onesimus, who must have been a slave, at some time, if not our one! In verse 11, which has been edited out of the Missal reading, Paul makes a joke about his name saying that he was no longer useless but useful.

Runaway slaves would migrate to Rome, which was the only place in the world where they might not be discovered. If they were caught they would be crucified. In Rome, they formed an underground community and a good proportion of them became Christians.

Under Paul's influence Onesimus had become a Christian. In sending him back to his master, Paul commends him as “no longer a slave, but a brother” Paul did not thereby disapprove of slavery, but claimed that Christianity transformed the relationship between master and slave.

Slavery is one of those emotive subjects that arouses extreme passion. We may agree amongst ourselves that slavery is wrong, but we cannot assume that people from a different culture ought to have had the same convictions. For us, our experience arises from our history of West Indian plantations and the American cotton trade, an experience which Paul did not have. Slavery for him was an inherited and integral part of society, accepted as natural by slaves as much as by slaveowners.

It was quite common for a slave to earn his freedom, become a Roman citizen and a prosperous member of society. Paul does not go so far as to suggest that Philemon should emancipate Onesimus, but does suggest that a Christian slave should be regarded and treated as a brother and not as property.

This letter is useful to remind us that firstly, Biblical lessons may not simply be transferred from the 1st to the 21st century. We have different conditions, problems, morality and knowledge. We must expect that different Christians will in good conscience reach different conclusions, not least in the seriousness of the question at stake.

This little letter - because it is Pauline – puts before us the fundamental attitude of the early Church to slavery, which no matter what we think, we may find difficult to accept. But it does more than that. It makes crystal clear the fact that moral responsibility is personal. Paul makes it plain that Philemon must decide what is the right thing for him to do. So to-day with many more moral issues than Paul could have imagined, so must we.

**Gospel: Luke 14:25-33**

This gospel consists of two sayings on the cost of discipleship, followed by two parables to illustrate the necessity of facing that cost. (The tower-builder and the king going to war).

"Hate" (Greek is miseo v. 26) sounds harsh. The Hebrew equivalent word (SANE) may be translated ‘hate’ but more accurately means ‘to love less’ An example can be found in Deuteronomy, (21;15-17) where one wife who is loved less is not to be placed at a disadvantage over one who is loved more. The real meaning here in Luke is that following Jesus means one must prefer discipleship to one’s previous life.

The saying in verse 27 does not mean that all true disciples must be martyrs in the literal sense. The Greek word ‘martyr’ in the time of Jesus simply meant ‘witness’, but later Christian witness so often ended in death that it came to mean what we understand by it. Yet, martyrdom is discipleship carried to its ultimate conclusion. Hence the honour the Church has always paid to its martyrs. Martyrdom has become rarer, but the standard of commitment should be no less.

A Church that tolerates the practices of the society in which it lives is as useless as a chocolate teapot. It loses all claim to membership of the revolutionary Kingdom of God. In our Catechisms should we not make explicit the differences between us and the world? In our Catholic schools do we sufficiently stress what is wrong with the world, and emphasise the cost of discipleship?

Both parables (vv. 28-30; 31-32) are in the context of self-renunciation (v. 33) The cost of discipleship is significant. The exhortation (vv. 26-27) is couched in its strongest terms, and the situation envisaged in the (relatively) rare one in which a person is called upon to choose between the following of Christ and one's own relatives.

In v. 27 'to carry the cross' is a metaphor meaning to be prepared to face death. The disciple of Jesus should be prepared to lay down life; he or she is like one condemned to death, carrying the instrument of execution (see in 19:17).

The twin parables (vv. 28-32) drive home the lesson that discipleship does involve a fully informed commitment; it cannot be undertaken casually.

Though the parables appear to repeat each other they are, in fact, complementary. In the first, the builder is free to undertake his construction or not; he is able to consider the matter without pressure. The king, on the other hand, is already at a disadvantage. His enemy is already on the move with superior forces. Therefore he must act.

Similarly, in the summons to follow Christ: we have to count the cost both of accepting that invitation and of rejecting it. One who responds to Christ must come with eyes wide open. On the other hand, it is also signing a blank cheque. One cannot ever really know everything that will be required by discipleship.

The parables may seem discouraging but they are to be understood in much the same way as the saying of v. 26. The following of Christ is at all times a serious business and, in certain circumstances, it can be a very serious business indeed.

This is true, for instance, in time of persecution. In Cheshire in 2022, however, it seems that we have got away with it rather lightly. Similarly in the early fourth century, the persecutions of two hundred and fifty years turned overnight into patronage. It suddenly became advantageous to be a Christian.

The Church had emerged from the circumstances that bred martyrs and gained hundreds of poor quality Christians in return. The reaction was that some of the more devout sought voluntary hardships as ascetics in the deserts and in hermitages. (See postscript) It is scarcely less true in the modern world where the Christian is obliged to renounce so much that is taken for granted by others.

Personally, I have a great problem with this passage. I cannot see that throwing up one’s responsibilities towards one’s family can be what Jesus required of all his disciples. For many of us vocation must find another level of commitment yet one of dedication as complete as that of the martyr himself. What that is must be worked out between the disciple and the master and may not be subject to anyone else’s approval. The two paragraphs which comprise todays Gospel must be the most personal on record and require the greatest soul-searching.

Postscript. Hermitages were a frequent feature of pre-Reformation Church life in this country, and the location of one may be seen in S. Laurence’s graveyard in Frodsham. It is in the middle of the east end of the sanctuary wall and housed an anchoress who was entombed underneath the Altar during the 13th century.