

**23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Year C: How are our lives to be run? Calculating the cost.**

**First Reading: Wisdom 9:13-19: Can we work out God's will for us?**

**Second Reading: Philemon 9-10+12-17: Paul returns a slave to his owner;**

**Gospel: Luke 14:25-33: Careful calculations have a place in our faith.**

When we describe people as 'calculating', it often means we suspect that they are devious – even though they appear charming. We fear they plan to turn every situation to their own advantage. The result: no-one aiming to follow Jesus sincerely would want to be 'calculating' – would they? And yet, that seems to be what Jesus suggests in this gospel – at least, at first glance

For the Wisdom reading, you'll need either a post-1970 missal or an RC Bible, as most other Bibles don't include this late-Old Testament Greek Book – for the same reason as Ecclesiasticus last week. Wisdom's author wonders how we can discern what God's will is for us. He accepts that it is not easy, "for a perishable body presses down the soul". He believes that our bodies & souls are opposed to each other – a view of human life that was still in vogue when I was younger. No matter how enlightened we think we are now, most adults feel that the urges of 'the flesh' (in all senses) go against our spiritual nature's higher 'call'. Modern western culture has simply given up any serious concern on this issue: it assumes that most appetites can be satisfied, at no cost to our personal development. Self-control is urged on us for health, not moral, reasons, but Christians know that 'passion' often goes against what God wants for us.

To discover God's will, the writer says we need the help of "Wisdom". A few years later, Christians interpreted the gift of "Wisdom" as being the Second Person of the Trinity – the "Eternal Word" in John's gospel – made flesh in Jesus Christ. In turn, Jesus promised the Holy Spirit as our guide and advocate: it would come from the Father and Himself, to point out the way we should go. Of course, this does not happen by magic – Bible writers assume that we will try to pray, to open ourselves to God's influence, so that we can see which way we should go. This is shown by ideas that come into our minds; the people we meet; the places where we are; and by taking advice that is sincere and reliable.

But there is a cost to following Jesus – in whatever walk of life we plan for ourselves. In the gospel, Jesus talks in language that is shocking when first heard, as he uses the word "hate" to describe our attitude to good people who could distract us from following him. Obviously, this is an exaggeration to make the point – you can see this when he says we need to "hate our own life too". He means that choices must be made, and these can sometimes mean leaving those

whom we love. Elsewhere, he uses the very Jewish palindrome: “He who saves his life will lose it; he who loses it will save it.” He means that our priorities must be adaptable to the needs of following Jesus. The word “life” here means our spiritual relationship with God, as well as the everyday physical life that we all have. The two sorts of ‘life’ need to be in balance

After saying that, Jesus invites us to use common-sense. Some people may be full of religious fervour, wanting to drop everything to follow Jesus – just as the first disciples had already “left all things to follow him” (Luke 5:11). But Jesus knows that this won’t work for everyone, therefore he asks would-be followers to do some ‘calculating’ – in the best sense of the word. Using two short – but practical – parables, he tells us to try to work out at a human level if we are willing – and able - to accept what following him implies. He talks of a builder who goes bankrupt half-way through a job (he hadn’t done the costing in advance); he mentions a king who leads his army into an unwinnable war (he hadn’t studied the strategic implications first). In both cases, the result is ignominy: the builder is left with a job half-done; the king needs to negotiate a peace-treaty before the battle starts. At first, this sounds an awfully worldly way to think, before becoming Jesus’ follower, but thankfully, it’s realistic! If people had practised such careful, practical preparation before committing to marriage or priesthood, many personal tragedies would have been avoided.

Lastly, I dare to mention the 2nd reading – the one-chapter, 25-verse letter to Philemon. Paul, under house-arrest in Rome, is sending back to his wealthy friend Philemon a runaway slave, who had fled to Rome, met Paul there, and become a Christian. Many modern readers will howl with anger at the very thought - but we need to hold our horses! If we read the letter, we see that Paul accepts the social rules of the time, but with strings. The slave – Onesimus (pronounced ‘Onn-ezz-ee-mus’) will go back, “not as a slave any more, but something much better – a dear brother...in the Lord”. Paul is asking Philemon to treat Onesimus as a fellow Christian; a relationship of love & respect that over-rides any legal sort of ownership. Therefore, Philemon’s way of following Jesus means treating his ex-slave well, even at some personal cost in his society.

Most readers won’t be full-time religious (much less slave-owners!) but we all have some call to follow Jesus. I suggest we pray often to see what the implications of this are, and to accept them with generosity. *Fr Jim Dunne.*