

28th Sunday of Year B: Wisdom; God's Word; True 'Treasure'.

First Reading: Wisdom 7:7-11: The writer praises the gift of Wisdom;

Second Reading: Hebrews 4:12-13: God's Word penetrates our inner self;

Gospel: Mark 10:17-30: The Rich Young Man & what this teaches us.

At first glance, these three readings do not have much in common. However, when we think about them seriously, we can see that they show the way God's Word / message / grace (whatever you choose to call it) affects our lives at the deepest level. The second reading, from the Letter to the Hebrews, talks of this Word "*slipping through the place where the soul is divided from the spirit... judging secret emotions and thoughts*". In other words, it reaches our most basic human feelings and decisions. I remember one evening, in my previous parish, when a visiting lady said to me after Mass: "How did you guess my personal family problem in your sermon?" I replied that I hadn't; I had simply offered my interpretation of one of that Sunday's readings. It was an important reminder for me that preachers must treat Bible or Church teachings with care, as they often deal with matters close to many personal situations.

The first reading again comes from one of my favourite Old Testament books: Wisdom. (You will need either a post-1970 missal or an RC Bible for this.) The author prays for the gift of Wisdom – a blessing that offers not so much academic knowledge as the sort of understanding that makes us rounded people, able to make good choices. He says: "*Compared with Wisdom, all gold is a pinch of sand, and beside her, silver ranks as mud.*" The author does not deny that we do need some gold / silver / cash to survive, but he stresses that, for true happiness, we need God's gift of Wisdom. This gift helps us to be happy and holy, and to make the right decisions in life.

This is where the gospel comes in. Matthew, Mark and Luke all mention the Rich Young Man; he asked Jesus what he had to do "*to inherit eternal life*". Quizzed about keeping the commandments of the Law of Moses, he answered that he had kept them "*from his earliest days*", meaning since coming of age - at 12 in Jewish custom. All 3 gospels show that the man was not showing off, or being insincere. Mark adds: "*Jesus looked steadily at him and loved him*". This was the sort of love Jesus had for the apostles closest to him, and so he offered the man chance to join his band of followers: "*There is one thing you lack. Go and sell everything you own; give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come and follow me.*" This was a "call" or "vocation" of the truest and clearest sort. The man's reaction? "*His face fell at these words; he went away sad, for he was a man of great wealth.*"

I feel this to be one of the saddest events in the gospels, yet I am glad it is there, because (like the ‘doubting Thomas’ story) it teaches us so much. The man just could not abandon his wealth (think of the “gold & silver” references in the first reading) in order to follow the one person who could offer him spiritual peace of mind. It prompted Jesus to make the very un-Jewish comment that it is hard to “enter the Kingdom of God” whilst hanging on to riches. Here, he overturned the common Jewish belief that riches in this world were a public reward for a morally good life, while poverty and suffering were the sign of a morally bad one. Of course, the Kingdom of God is not a place, but a spiritual state of mind, where we are open to God’s Word, influence and grace. So, to “enter” it means having to let go of over-attachment to earthly things. This is what the writer of the first reading was saying, but slightly differently.

Is it the case that people cannot have any “riches” and be part of God’s Kingdom? If that were true, than almost everyone reading this would be sunk! I should like to make two points. First: Jesus had some “rich” friends: we see them throughout the gospel stories. For example, Joseph of Arimathaea and Nicodemus (who buried Jesus’ body) were rich men - not part of the 12 apostles, but disciples nonetheless. The second point is that, in this week’s gospel, Jesus felt the need to test the keen, but naive young man. His problem was always going to be his over-attachment to his wealth; this had to be pointed out, but the resulting failure caused not anger, but sadness.

What of us? With age, we should become so mature, as to know there are things we cannot do – not due to physical or academic inability, but to our personality & attachments. In religious vocations, not all can surrender to a life of poverty, chastity & obedience. Most parish clergy are diocesan priests, who accept two of the three, but are not bound by a vow of poverty; this gives us a level of independence not enjoyed by monks. In that sense at least, our lives resemble other people’s. It is sometimes harder to manage assets and money morally, than to live with a superior who has total control of providing for us. Jesus never condemned the young man, but showed him his “Achilles’ heel”, or weak spot. You and I also need to be honest, in admitting what we can and cannot do. While few are perfect, all can do something, so the main thing is to pray for wisdom to find that out - then grace & strength to try to do it. *Fr Jim Dunne.*