

***FIRST IMPRESSIONS* 28th SUNDAY (B)**

Wisdom 7: 7-11 Psalm 90 Hebrews 4: 12-13 Mark 10: 17-30

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

PRENOTE:

After each parish retreat we add names of parishioners who have signed up to receive “First Impressions.” I thought I would begin acknowledging them. So, welcome to the people of St. Christopher’s Parish in Tonawanda (Buffalo, NY)—where it rained for a week and the winds howled!!!

In everyday discourse, when we describe a person as “wise,” we don’t usually mean he/she sits around on a mountaintop studying books and contemplating. That’s not why we call them wise; though that may be one source for their wisdom. For us, a truly wise person is one who can give us guidance in solving a problem; help us resolve a conflict or guide us in setting lifetime goals.

Which is the way our Jewish ancestors thought of Wisdom, as a practical gift that would help them: master a skill; cope with life; gain self-control; govern a people (Solomon is a good example of that); live ethically, etc. The Bible has a variety of Wisdom literature: Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes and today’s Book of Wisdom. (The Book of Wisdom has traditionally been ascribed to Solomon, but it was written hundreds of years after Solomon by a sage who knew Greek philosophy.) But all the biblical books are permeated with wisdom themes. For example, the Book of Psalms, Deuteronomy and the Prophets.

While the people of the Near East also cultivated it, what is unique to biblical wisdom is the personification of Wisdom (Sophia, in Greek) in feminine terms. The Bible also describes Wisdom as originating from God and as God’s revelation through creation (Prov 3:19; Ps 19:1). In today’s selection from the Book of Wisdom, she is depicted as a guide to help the petitioner follow God’s ways. The New Testament picked up on the wisdom tradition. Jesus is shown in the Gospels as a wise person... a teacher... a rabbi. Did you notice that the rich man addressed Jesus as, “Good Teacher?” Mark previously told us that Jesus’ wisdom is “greater than Solomon’s” (6:2). In the Hebrew scriptures, Wisdom invites others to follow her, “Does not Wisdom call and Understanding raise her voice?” In Proverbs 8 (the whole chapter is a wonderful read!), Wisdom promises life and the

gifts of God to all who follow her. You can see then why our first reading was chosen today. It points us to Jesus who is Wisdom enfleshed. He offers a wisdom that gives eternal life to those who choose to respond to his call and follow him.

The rich man wants exactly that – eternal life. But was his notion of eternal life and maybe ours, just an extension of his current, comfortable situation? Does he want his good life to go on and on? Is he sincerely seeking wisdom from Jesus? Will he be responsive to what Jesus tells him, even though it will require profound change in his life? At first, in response to the man's question, Jesus seems to brush him off. "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone." Does he doubt the man's sincerity? Typically, Jesus doesn't like flattery. He certainly isn't impressed by a person's status and external trappings, such as jewelry, fine clothes and an abundance of material possessions.

We have a tendency to judge a person's worth by what they have achieved or what they own – but not Jesus. While Jesus wasn't impressed by the man's wealth, perhaps the disciples were. Maybe they stepped aside so that the man could have easy access to Jesus. Maybe they were flattered that their teacher would be approached by a person of distinction seeking advice. Jesus needs to respond to the rich man but also teach his disciples a lesson.

Let's accept the rich man's words: he has been a devout and a good person. He has followed the wisdom of his ancestors, has obeyed the Commandments – wise teachings for a good life. Let's presume all that because, while not being impressed by the man's status, Jesus does seem to have taken the man at his word. He looks on this searcher with love and offers him a new piece of wisdom. He tells the man that there is still more he must do – get rid of his wealth. And not only that, but still more, "... come follow me."

There is a "prosperity gospel" in the air these days. Some preachers are teaching that God wants us to be prosperous and, if we have faith and pray properly, we will be "blessed" by God and experience material gain. There is a tendency to link our good behavior with rewards from God: we do good and so God rewards us. Here is the proof of my good life and effective prayer – check the size of my house, the make of my car and the content of my portfolio.

Jesus, the Teacher, must have seemed absurd to the rich man and those who heard what Jesus told him. His contemporaries believed that riches were a visible and

tangible sign of having found favor with God. While poverty was a sign of God's displeasure and therefore a punishment. So, if they had possessions, why should they give up the very things God gave them as a reward for their good and proper behavior? If he gave away his riches, what proof would the man have of God's smiling on him?

What we have as the surest sign of God's love and good favor towards us is Jesus Christ. That's what the man would have too – if he dropped everything off at the feet of the poor and followed Jesus. He would do what the disciples were trying to do – follow the Teacher's wisdom and learn a whole new way to live. Jesus is the personification of Wisdom in the Book of Proverbs, who calls out to docile hearers, "To you, O people, I call... you simple ones gain resource, you fools gain sense" (8:4-5). Speaking of fools, the rich man made a choice for his possessions over possessing Jesus! There's no eternal life in that!

Today's gospel immediately follows the story of Jesus' embracing and blessing the children. He tells his listeners, "I assure you, that whoever does not accept the reign of God like a little child shall not take part in it" (10:15). Lest we think Jesus is just being poetic, or Mark is telling only us about Jesus' love for children, he immediately narrates the story about the rich man.

In the Bible riches aren't condemned as an evil in themselves. Today's story affirms that a person can live a good life even though he or she is rich. A challenge I hear addressed to all of us is: upon what have I placed my security and confidence? On good health? Youth? Our national armies? Our status in the church? Our comfortable lifestyles? No one has to remind us these days how quickly our fortunes can change. The very things we possess and have worked hard to own may seduce us into thinking that we're doing just fine in life – "Keep up the good work." But we can't earn or buy the security that Jesus is offering us, eternal life, which can't be taken away by any force on earth .

The very next chapter in Mark will trace Jesus' "triumphant entry into Jerusalem" (chapter 11) and then his collapse. What happened? Didn't God love him; find favor in all he did and said? Of course, God did! But Jesus would have no rich prize to show for his life's efforts. He would end up on the cross. He gave up everything to teach us Wisdom's ways. So much for "the prosperity gospel!"

Does our following Jesus cost us anything? Does it mean giving up free time to

help someone in need? Does what Jesus called us to do wear us down at times? When we get up in the morning do we plan out how we can get more of what we already have; or do we whisper a brief prayer as we brush our teeth, “Show me what you would have this follower do for you today.”

Many times, in our Eucharist today we will call Jesus, “Lord.” Each time we do, we are also announcing a challenge to ourselves and one another. If he is our Lord, what are we willing to change in our lives to follow him more closely? Shall we give up the false securities that even family and friends have taught us to trust in?

Today Jesus is offering us a practical wisdom. While our world’s wisdom encourages us to grab for the “gold ring,” true wisdom lies in becoming his followers and putting aside everything else that hinders us from doing that. Following him means living as he did, with an open heart and hands for those in need. No one need feel guilty about working hard to support our families and save for their future. But today’s piece of gospel wisdom reminds us that we need to keep our eyes open for where eternal life waits for us – it’s in following Jesus and patterning our lives after his.

QUOTABLE

Let me be clear. While immigration indeed has economic, social and legal impact, it is primarily a humanitarian issue, the axis around which its other aspects should revolve. Immigration laws ultimately should be judged by how they impact basic human dignity and God-given human rights, not how they impact our economy, cultural dynamic, or demographics.

----Roger Cardinal Mahony, Archbishop of Los Angeles

FAITH BOOK

Mini-reflections on the Sunday scripture readings designed for persons on the run.

“Faith Book” is also brief enough to be posted in the Sunday parish bulletins people take home.

From today’s Gospel reading:

Jesus, looking [at the rich man], loved him and said to him,

“You are lacking in one thing.

Go, sell what you have, and give to the poor
and you will have treasure in heaven; then come,
follow me.”

Reflection:

While our world's wisdom encourages us to grab for the "gold ring," true wisdom lies in becoming Jesus' followers and putting aside everything else that hinders us from doing that. Today's piece of gospel wisdom reminds us that we need to keep our eyes open for where eternal life waits for us – it's in following Jesus and patterning our lives after his.

So, we ask ourselves:

- At this Eucharist, do I again hear Jesus' new invitation to follow him?
- What obstacle in my life keeps me from being more committed to Christ?

JUSTICE BULLETIN BOARD

"How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God"

(Gospel of Mark 10:23)

We instinctively protest the truth of this strong statement from Jesus. Americans live in a culture with a strong bias in favor of the rich and powerful. We wonder, along with the apostles, ***"Then who can be saved?"***

Doing Faith Justice, by Fred Kammer, SJ, a book available in the parish library, sheds some light on the difficulties wealth creates for those who want to be followers of Jesus. The author describes a process, which occurs over and over again in the Old Testament and continues today in our own lives and in the life of communities and nations. This "cycle" begins with the Original Blessing of creation and life lived in community. Very soon we forget the Giver and think of ourselves as "owners". Possessions begin to have dominion over us, not the other way around. It becomes easy to forget the poor. Once we have forgotten the poor, it is not a far step to forgetting Yahweh and creating other gods, (a better job, a bigger house, a better car, a larger bank account, etc). We trade the "freedom of the children of God", for a life of slavery to the gods offered to us by our culture. And we embed this "preference for the rich and powerful" into our laws and tax structures. Then the prophets come to call us back: Amos, Micah, Isaiah, Jeremiah...and Jesus.

The latest census numbers speak the prophet's voice and biblical judgment on our global priorities.

Did you know?

- Almost half the world's population, over three billion people — live on less than \$2.50 a day.
- According to UNICEF, 25,000 children die each day due to poverty.
(<http://www.globalissues.org/>)

· In 2008, 36.5 million people in the U.S., including 12.9 million children, lived below the poverty line- nearly 10% of U.S. families.

(<http://www.usccb.org/cchd/povertyusa/index.htm>)

· More people are without health insurance, bringing the total to 46 million Americans.

(<http://www.nchc.org/facts/coverage.shtml>)

What can I do?

· Borrow and read *Doing Faith Justice* from the parish library.

· Be informed on local and national spending policies affecting the poor. Speak out on the side of the poor.

· Volunteer in a ministry which puts you in contact with Christ in the poor. Get to know a poor person and ask yourself, "*Why is this person poor?*"

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, N. C.)

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I post in this space several inmates' names and addresses. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know we have not forgotten them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, "*People of Faith Against the Death Penalty.*" If the inmate responds you might consider becoming pen pals.

Please write to:

- William Anthony #0654093 (On death row since 6/3/99)
- James Jaynes #0206197 (6/4/99)
- James Jaynes #0291861 (7/8/99)

Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, N.C. 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Our webpage addresses: <https://www.PreacherExchange.com>

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”,

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