

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle C

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

1st Reading - Wisdom 11:22-12:1

The Book of Wisdom, or Wisdom of Solomon as it is called in some translations of the Bible, is believed to have been written in Greek, in Alexandria, around 50 B.C.. Although the book itself claims that it was written by Solomon, it was in fact written some 870 years later with the author, in order to highlight the importance of the work, using the prestige of Solomon, the greatest of the wise men of Israel. This attribution to another is called “pseudonymity” and was also used in the book of Ecclesiastes.

The author abominates any kind of polytheism and is proud to belong to a “holy and blameless race.” The first part of the book (chapters 1 - 5) is prophetic in style and somewhat Hebraic in the concepts it uses. It exhorts people to practice righteousness and sincerely seek God. The second part (chapters 6 - 9) concentrates on the source of wisdom and the need to obtain wisdom. The third part (chapters 10 - 19), from which our reading today comes, speaks of the magnificence of wisdom as demonstrated by the history of the chosen people. Today we hear that God spares men because He loves them.

²² Indeed, before you the whole universe is as a grain from a balance,

A grain is a tiny particle used for weighing in scales.

or a drop of morning dew come down upon the earth. ²³ But you have mercy on all, because you can do all things; and you overlook the sins of men that they may repent.

He can be merciful too.

²⁴ For you love all things that are and loathe nothing that you have made; for what you hated, you would not have fashioned. ²⁵ And how could a thing remain, unless you willed it; or be preserved, had it not been called forth by you? ²⁶ But you spare all things, because they are yours, O LORD and lover of souls, ^{12:1} for your imperishable spirit is in all things!

This refers either to wisdom as the agent of God’s immanence or to the breath of life put in creatures by God.

² Therefore you rebuke offenders little by little, warn them, and remind them of the sins they are committing, that they may abandon their wickedness and believe in you, O LORD!

God, whose power is irresistible and who is therefore free of constraint, loves the things that His creative power has made, for only love can explain His having created and preserved them. Because of His love, He pardons them and is patient in their regard so that they might repent. God even gave the wicked Canaanites a chance to repent because they too were men whom He had created.

2nd Reading - 2 Thessalonians 1:11-2:2

Today we begin our study of Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians.

Accompanied by Silas, St. Paul arrived at Thessalonica in the course of his second apostolic journey (A.D. 49-52) after leaving Philippi around the summer of the year 50.

Thessalonica, now known as Salonica, is situated on the Aegean Sea and was a flourishing center of trade in St. Paul's time. Founded in 315 B.C. by Cassander, who named it after his wife, a sister of Alexander the Great, the city came under the Romans in 186 B.C.. As far as religion was concerned it was a typical pagan city. Archaeology has unearthed the remains of many statues of gods and priestesses which give an idea of the religious practices of the Thessalonians. Inscriptions discovered indicate that they were very ignorant of religious truth and had no clear view of the survival of the soul after death.

There were quite a number of Jews living in Thessalonica. In keeping with his custom, St. Paul went first to the synagogue to proclaim the good news: Jesus was the messiah, the Old Testament prophecies had come true in Him, He had redeemed mankind by His passion and resurrection. We know that he preached in the synagogue on three successive Sabbaths (Acts 17:2) but he may have stayed there for as long as two months, lodging in the house of Jason. As a result of his preaching many Jews and Gentiles came to believe, including "not a few of the leading women" (Acts 17:4). His success earned him the envy of certain Jews, who organized demonstrations and attacked Jason's house, looking for Paul and Silas. Not finding them, they brought Jason before the city authorities and he had to go bail for the two apostles (Acts 17:5-9). This led to St. Paul and his companions leaving the city in a hurry the same night – going first to Beroea (Acts 17:10) and later to Athens (Acts 17:15).

Paul's unexpected departure from Thessalonica meant that the instruction of the recent converts was cut short; also their situation became difficult due to persecution by the Jews. This led the apostle to send Timothy to confirm them in the faith (1 Thessalonians 3:1-2) and bring back news of them.

Timothy caught up with Paul in Corinth and gave him a good report of the Thessalonians: they were persevering in faith and charity, despite still being harassed. Timothy also reported that certain questions were troubling the Thessalonians – things to do with life after death, and the second coming.

The apostle wrote the first letter, which he sent via Timothy, to complete his interrupted preaching and teaching. It had the effect of reassuring the Thessalonians about the fate of those who had already died in the Lord. However, some did not understand him correctly; some so misunderstood him in fact that they began to give up working (2 Thessalonians 3:11). When Paul heard of this he wrote the second letter to clear up the misunderstanding.

11 [] [W]e always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling and powerfully bring to fulfillment every good purpose and every effort of faith,

Moral fulfillment depends on God's own power. It is His grace that will make the faithful worthy of the Father's call. Accordingly, this fulfillment will amount to mutual glorification at the parousia of their intimate personal relationship to the Lord Jesus.

12 that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, in accord with the grace of our God and Lord Jesus Christ. ^{2:1} We ask you, brothers, with regard to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our assembling with him,

The writer appeals for sober judgment about Christ's triumphal coming, which he regards not as a date, but as the fulfillment of Christian life.

"When the resurrection will be, he has not said: 'It will come in due order'; he has said 'and our assembling with him.' This point is quite important. Observe how Paul's exhortation is accompanied by praise and encouragement, for he makes it clear that Jesus and all the saints will certainly appear at that time with us." [Saint John Chrysostom (between A.D. 398-404), *Homilies on the Second Epistle to the Thessalonians* 3]

2 not to be shaken out of your minds suddenly,

Sort of a mania, if you would, about the coming of the end time.

or to be alarmed either by a "spirit," or by an oral statement,

A charismatic gift of prophecy.

or by a letter allegedly from us

A forged letter. It is not clear that forged letters were actually circulating.

to the effect that the day of the Lord is at hand.

"Therefore, not to know the times is something different from moral decay and the love of vice. For when the apostle Paul said 'Don't be shaken out of your minds suddenly or be alarmed either by a spirit, or an oral statement, or a letter allegedly from us to the effect that the day of the Lord is at hand,' he obviously did not want them to believe those who

thought the coming of the Lord was already at hand. Neither, moreover, did he want them to be like the wicked servant and say, 'My Lord will not be coming for a long time,' and deliver themselves over to destruction by pride and immoral behavior. Thus Paul's desire that they should not listen to false rumors about the imminent approach of the last day was consistent with his wish that they should await the coming of their Lord fully prepared and ready for the journey, with lamps burning." [Saint Augustine of Hippo (ca. A.D. 418), *Letters* 199,1.2]

Gospel - Luke 19:1-10

As Jesus draws closer to Jerusalem and His passion, He continues to outrage the Pharisees by associating with people whom the Pharisees consider less than worthy – the poor, the afflicted, the sinners. Since to the Pharisees a man is known by the company he keeps, Jesus surely cannot be from God because His associates don't keep all the ritual commandments. Today we hear the story of Zacchaeus the Publican.

19:1 He came to Jericho and intended to pass through the town. 2 Now a man there named Zacchaeus,

The name means "clean."

who was a chief tax collector and also a wealthy man,

The tax collector received his funds from whatever "excess" tax he collected – over and above what had been levied. Like other rich men, he was probably "attached" to his riches as well.

3 was seeking to see who Jesus was; but he could not see him because of the crowd, for he was short in stature. 4 So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree in order to see Jesus,

A short trunk and wide lateral branches made it easy to climb.

who was about to pass that way. 5 When he reached the place, Jesus looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down quickly, for today I must stay at your house."

Today; the waiting is over. God's salvation is not something to be considered sometime in the future, it is already being inaugurated.

6 And he came down quickly and received him with joy. 7 When they all saw this, they began to grumble, saying, "He has gone to stay at the house of a sinner."

The generic "all" murmur against Jesus' crossing the boundaries separating the "clean" from the "unclean."

8 But Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, “Behold, half of my possessions, Lord, I shall give to the poor, and if I have extorted anything from anyone

There is controversy over these words being translated in the present tense – if one interprets the tense as futuristic, then Zacchaeus is saying he is no longer a sinner – he resolves to change his ways. If one views it as present tense, then Zacchaeus is arguing that he is not a sinner because it is his customary conduct to be generous and just. In this case Jesus, in verse 9, vindicates the good reputation of Zacchaeus. The futuristic interpretation is preferred.

I shall repay it four times over.”

Zacchaeus goes way beyond the requirements of the law in restitution. Numbers 5:5-7 requires that full restitution plus 20 percent be returned.

9 And Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house because this man too is a descendant of Abraham.

Because of Jesus’ offer to stay with Zacchaeus, his acceptance of Jesus, and his change of life, salvation has come to his entire household.

10 For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save what was lost.”

This brings to mind the three parables on finding what was lost that we had in this Cycle on the 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time (lost sheep, lost coin, prodigal son) and the joy which heaven celebrates when a repentant sinner returns.