

28th Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 13, 2024

The central theme for our readings today is that we must give priority to God in our lives, not to our possessions.

The first reading from the Book of Wisdom advises us to use the God-given virtue of prudence in order to seek true wisdom and to distinguish them from vanishing earthly realities, like riches or political and social influence.

Solomon chose Wisdom before everything else — and he received “everything else” along with it! Since Jesus is Wisdom Incarnate, when we put following Jesus ahead of everything else, we, too, receive “everything else” along with Jesus.

The second reading warns us that we are accountable to God for our use, or misuse, of His blessings, and that the “living and effective word of God” must be our guide in evaluating our use of His blessings.

In our Gospel passage from St. Mark, we find three sections: a narrative about Jesus’ encounter with a rich man, Jesus’ sayings about wealth as a possible obstacle to discipleship, and Jesus’ promise of reward for those who share their material possessions with the needy.

Reminding the rich man of the commandments that deal with relationships with other people, Jesus challenged him to sell what he had, and to give the money to the poor. Unfortunately his disciples were shocked by this challenge. But Jesus declared that true religion consisted in one’s sharing of one’s blessings with others rather than hoarding and/or getting inordinately attached to them.

My dear friends in Christ, is following God’s commandments enough?

That’s the big question, right? At least that’s the question placed before us this day after hearing Jesus’ conversation with the rich man, and after

his subsequent conversation with his disciples. And my guess is that this isn't one of those bible stories in which we quickly "tune out" because it's so familiar to us. No, for this one we probably pay more attention to it than many other stories. And the reason is simple. The question posed by the rich man is our question too.

"Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Or to use our modern language - How do I get "in"? For many of us, this is the central question of our faith, the one that drives our thoughts and choices through life. And to a certain extent, it kind of makes sense. It's the carrot at the end of the stick. The finish line up ahead. The goal of the whole spiritual enterprise.

We're all going to die some day, and well, we don't want it to end there. We want there to be more. We trust and hope that there is more. We believe there is more. And we need to know what exactly is enough? What will make me get "picked"? How do I "win" the game we are all playing?

Is following God's commandments enough?

In one sense, Jesus probably appreciated the question. It sort of showed him that the rich man was thinking about the big questions, wondering about things that truly mattered. You see, in Jesus' time the idea of an afterlife was not a settled matter. Religious leaders were not in agreement about whether or not there was something beyond this life, or what it was like, or how one got there. The rich man in the story seems to have been considering that very possibility. And he wanted to know where he stood. But in another sense, Jesus might have been a little disappointed in the question. The reason being, he might have sensed that the young man was asking a slightly different question, one that begins with the words, "What is the minimum I have to do . . .?" And Jesus also knew that the answer he was about to give would surely disappoint the man standing

before him, for it demanded so much more than what the man had hoped for.

“Go, sell what you have, and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven . . .”

That answer didn't just disappoint the man in the story. It disappoints us, too.

The truth is that more often than not we reduce faith, belief, religion, the spiritual journey in such a way that it becomes simply one more piece we add to our lives, a kind of “just in case” in the event any of this is true. It's a kind of game with God, a deal of sorts, a necessary “chore” we are forced to accept if we want the prize at the end of all of it. What most of us want to do is to live our lives however we want, but somehow also do “just enough” so that we don't find ourselves on the outside looking in come judgment day.

In other words, we want our relationship with God to be a part of our life, and God wants it to be the entirety of our life, our entire purpose, our whole driving force. And that can't happen if we just adopt a kind of “have to” Christianity. It can only happen if we embrace a “want to” Christianity, a whole way of thinking and acting and being that comes from a place of deep love for God, a love for who he is, and a love for what he asks from us and wants for us and died for us to be.

“Enough” should never be enough when it comes to the faith. We almost never accept it from others and we should never accept it for ourselves. None of us wants a boss who is just good enough. None of us wants a friend who is just good enough. None of us wants players on our teams to be just good enough. None of us wants neighbors who are just good enough or teachers who are just good enough or doctors who are just good enough. And we certainly don't want spouses who are just good enough. We want the best. Shouldn't WE also want to be the BEST?

We must remember that all of our endeavors in matters of faith exist not because God needs anything from us. These are things God asks of us because they are the best things for us and for those around us. This is how he made us. This is why he redeemed us. This is why he pours his Spirit upon us. It's not so we can just do a few extra things hoping to win God's favor. It's so we can be the beautiful, loving people he knows we can be, people in love with God and with each other, doing right by each other without counting the cost.

That's the challenge he placed before the rich man two thousand years ago. And that's the challenge he places before you and me this very day. What if we knew we had "won" heaven already?

Would that make us want to do more for God, or less?

That's a question, I believe each of us needs to answer for ourselves.