

Reflections on Sunday's Readings: November 3, 2019

Thirty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time [C]

Wisdom 11:22-12:2

2 Thessalonians 1:11-2:2

Luke 19: 1-10



The Power of Hospitality

Introduction

Our first reading from Wisdom is a powerful portrait of God. The writer knows God deeply and offers to all of us several beautiful insights about God. This would be another reading from the Hebrew Scriptures, like last week, to ponder later today or during the coming week.

Firstly, the writer offers that God is all powerful, and as such, all merciful. Only one with power can go beyond the strict rules of retribution, and thus be gracious and stretch the rules. Because God is all powerful and all-loving ... God can be, and chooses to be merciful. God chooses to offer mercy without limits. The Wisdom writer wants us to know that God is dedicated to raising us up with mercy. God always gives us a second chance.

This is because God has poured into all of creation the Spirit deeply alive in God's own heart. We have God's DNA in us, and God cherishes us. God never gives up on us and always helps us to begin again with grace and loving kindness! We are cherished by God, this Overwhelming Lover.

Jesus Comes to Us from the Heart of God

Jesus comes to us from the heart of the Trinity, the heart of God, to **make real**, to **make flesh**, this Love that is so alive in God. We see this again in the Gospel today.

Just before the scene with Zacchaeus, as Jesus and his band of men and women disciples are on the road to Jerusalem, Jesus takes the Twelve apart by themselves. He tells them for the third time that he will suffer and die in Jerusalem at the hands of the Gentiles, the Romans. Jesus knows what is coming, but the twelve apostles do not comprehend what he is saying.

Then as they approach the outskirts of Jericho, Jesus meets a blind man. This man asks Jesus for mercy, for “compassion that takes action.” The blind man is asking Jesus, the Son of David, to heal him. ‘Help me see again,’ he asks. Jesus responds to the man’s request and to his faith and heals him. The healed man who was blind is joyous, and he and the crowd accompany Jesus into the town of Jericho praising God. Try to picture this scene for a moment of Jesus coming into Jericho surrounded by this man, a number of townspeople, and his disciples ... all rejoicing in God’s mercy and love. It is quite a scene and quite a crowd around Jesus as they walk together into Jericho.

Jericho: An Oasis and a Hub

Jericho is really an “oasis” town. It is near one of the tributaries of the Jordan River so there are palm trees and at least one sycamore tree in the town. It is also a major crossroads on an east-west pathway or trade route. So it also is a place where taxes are collected. This would include the annual poll tax on men and women, the taxes on land, and the custom taxes on imports and exports. Jericho is a hub for commerce and taxes, and so there were also many tax-collectors in this town.

The tax-collectors were on the margins of society because they were collaborating with the Romans to collect these taxes and also because they added their commission on top of the taxes. They also were not appreciated for their manner of saying, for example, ‘let me see what you have there in your bundles.’ And ‘remember all of it will be taxed, so let me see what you have.’

Zacchaeus

Zacchaeus was one of the senior tax-collectors here in Jericho so he was making money from the other tax-collectors also; and so the Gospel story explains, he was a wealthy man.

But something else is going on in Zacchaeus. Something is stirring inside of him, and he wants to see Jesus. He wants to make some changes in his life. Zacchaeus likely wants to belong to the community around him once again too.

So he climbs up the sycamore tree to see Jesus more clearly. Try to picture him in his fine clothes running ahead of the crowd and climbing up the tree. Jesus comes by and looks up at him ... and speaks to him. There is urgency in Jesus’ words. ‘Zacchaeus, come down. I must have supper with you this day.’ Jesus, who knows he will be going on to Jerusalem with all that this means, is saying to Zacchaeus that ‘if this is to happen, it must happen now. I will not be coming back this way again.’ Jesus also likely senses the urgency in Zacchaeus’ desire to see him and to change, and so he says ‘let’s do this, Zacchaeus.’ A powerful insight here is that Jesus is willing to take this personal moment with Zacchaeus when he knows what he is about

to face in Jerusalem. This is the amazing generosity and sense of presence that Jesus has with each of us. Now is always the time for communion.

The People Grumble, but Jesus Smiles

Zacchaeus is deeply moved by this invitation of Jesus to have supper with him and stay with him. He is overjoyed in these moments. But the others from Jericho grumble about what is happening. Jesus is going to eat and to stay with this sinner, the one who gathers their money for the Romans and for himself.

But Zacchaeus stands his ground. He doesn't want to lose this moment of engagement with Jesus, and so he begins to speak about how he will give half of his money away to the poor ... and **if** I have cheated anyone or extorted anything from anyone ... he is cautious not to admit any guilt as such ... I will pay them back fourfold.

As this point I would bet that Jesus is smiling or possibly even laughing with joy. I can hear him say 'Yes, Zacchaeus, there are some things to take care of, but let us go and eat first. For today salvation has come to your house.' And to the people gathered around him, Jesus offered 'Zacchaeus is still a son of Abraham. I have come for just such as him ... to seek out and save what was lost.' And my hope would be that the people rejoiced then with Zacchaeus and Jesus in this moment of extraordinary grace.

Jesus and Zacchaeus enter then into the intimacy of a meal together. Even though it is Zacchaeus' house, Jesus is really the host and is providing the nourishment of mercy, loving-kindness, and the grace to change.

Conclusion

Much like today.

This is what is happening right now in this Eucharist. We are being invited today by Jesus to share a meal with him. We are being invited to a time of intimacy and hospitality, to a time of forgiveness and transformation at this Mass.

As I was preparing for this homily, a painting from my childhood came to mind. Possibly you know this painting also? It is a painting of Jesus knocking at a door, wanting to come in; but there is no door handle on the outside where Jesus is standing.

Jesus waits for us to open our hearts and our lives so he can bring us mercy, loving-kindness, and intimacy today. Let us not wait to open the door to the One who cherishes us, and let us rejoice when others ... some of whom we may wonder about ... respond to Jesus also.

Peace!

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