

Nineteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year C

Today's readings deal with the importance and the implications of belonging to God in faith. They spell out the fact that faith is not defined by a set of beliefs but by a commitment of trust in the Divine. The Israelites were rewarded for their dedication to God and certain patriarchal figures are listed by the author of Hebrews as models of trust. In the gospel reading Jesus gives credit to those whose lives of faith measure up to their commitment to God.

Wisdom 18:6-9 Generally referred to as the Wisdom of Solomon this book is not in the Jewish or the Protestant canons of Scripture. In these two faith traditions it figures in the apocrypha or deuterocanonical works, i.e., a second string body of sacred writings. The book of Wisdom is in the Catholic and Orthodox canons.

Internal evidence suggests the book was written sometime in the half-century before Christ, probably by a Greek-speaking Jewish author living in Alexandria. He writes under the name of Solomon but this is clearly a literary device designed to add authority to the work. Today we would regard this as an illegal attribution (*pseudepigraphon* = false signature) but in ancient times this was common enough and not an issue, because it gives the work status and gravitas. The writer's overall purpose was to strengthen the faith of his fellow Jews in the large Alexandrian Jewish community. The danger at the time was that the Jews would be seduced by the science and customs of the Hellenistic age and become sceptical of traditional Jewish ideas.

In today's text the anonymous writer is continuing his demonstration of the role of Wisdom in the history of the Israelites. His attention is on the last of the ten plagues and he points out that when the Egyptians prepared to eliminate the people of Israel, God punished them by killing the first-born males of every Egyptian family and later drowned their army in the Sea of Reeds.

We could be blown away by the matter-of-fact account of the writer as he contrasts the wholesale death among the Egyptians with the journey to new life of the Israelites. We might well wonder about the ancient Hebrew view of God in these verses – a God who looks after the chosen people and inflicts dreadful punishment on the unchosen ones. Weren't the Egyptians children of God like the rest of humanity? In Isaiah 19:25 we read the prophet quoting a blessing from God,

Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage.

These considerations urge us to be discerning when we reflect on Scripture. **It is surely a mistake to interpret some of the raw prejudice and exceptionalism of ancient Israelite culture as attitudes coming from divine inspiration.**

Psalm 33 The verses for today's Responsorial Psalm are not particularly the best that could be selected. The whole of this psalm is not about exceptionalism and privilege or being chosen. Rather, it has a universal thrust and follows the theme of the verse just quoted above from Isaiah 19. In fact, universalism emerges in this psalm as the work of Wisdom. All creation is loved by God and all people of good will are capable of being the chosen ones. The psalmist sings: choose love, choose God and you will live.

Hebrews 11:1-2, 8-19 This passage from the letter to the Hebrews (11) is a well-known eulogy in praise of faith. However, we Catholics have to be discerning here. Most of us refer to 'the faith' as the heritage of Catholicism, as in 'keep the faith' and then this becomes expressed in the collection of beliefs that we recite in one creed or another. But this is not what the anonymous author of the letter to the Hebrews is writing about. His focus is on *faithfulness, reliability, fidelity, commitment*. It refers to **believing in** somebody on the basis of trust and confidence.

Using an approach that was typical in classical Hebrew literature the author cites people and occasions in Israelite history to give solid examples of his argument. In Jewish tradition Abraham is the father of fidelity and trust in the Lord. His readiness to sacrifice his only son by his wife Sarah was the ultimate proof of his confidence in the Divine Presence. The writer credits the patriarch with his long view of life and human endeavour. Abraham's fidelity and trust did not wane even though some divine promises had not been fulfilled.

Certainty leaves no room for faith

The wisdom in the writer's exposition is that the effect of human growth and experience can produce in an individual the ability to rely on realities that are not always perceived by the human senses. This kind of reliance can inspire one with confidence to launch out into the deep in so many avenues in life.

If you were asked, 'What is the opposite of faith?' would you say 'doubt'? And yet, in reality, it is **certainty** that is the opposite of faith. Certainty leaves no room for faith, whereas doubt can leave itself open to discovery and awakening. There is wisdom in the Zen saying that sees in doubt an open door for growth through awakening:

Great doubt – great awakening
Little doubt – little awakening
No doubt – no awakening

Luke 12:32-48 This gospel passage continues the emphasis on reliability and faithfulness. Using a parable Jesus sets up a picture of unrestrained delight in a scene where the master of the house returns and finds his staff ready and waiting. The master is thrilled that his relationship with his staff is well beyond paid worker and boss, and he expresses his appreciation in spontaneous hospitality. He turns the tables and serves his servants. How extraordinary in the culture of Jesus' day!

The image of the master putting on an apron and serving his staff elicits a significant 'but' – but this is not true to life in the society of first-century Palestine. Jesus is obviously creating this unlikely and arresting scene to highlight the marvellous gladness and generosity of God welcoming the faithful pilgrim into the heavenly banquet.

Luke winds up the episode with a note to community leaders. Prompted by Peter's question, Jesus explains that the task of the leader is to supply the community with the spiritual food they need to nourish their growth. The master expects everyone to play their part and contribute to the welfare of the whole body. There is definitely no room for leaders to take advantage of those in their care or to help themselves to prestige, power and privilege.

With his final paragraph Luke refers to the end-time judgement and clearly has the return of Jesus at the Parousia in mind. It follows, of course, that having a punter's bet on the time of the Lord's return is not an adequate motivation for good behaviour.

Truth seems to be the chief casualty of power

The wisdom in today's reading comes back to reliability and faithfulness, and shouldn't these qualities characterise our every thought and action? There are commentators who say we are living in a post-truth world when it is so hard to put trust in the words of public figures and news media. And yet history shows we are no different from our equivalents in previous ages. We humans have a marvellous ability to kid ourselves. Truth seems to be the chief casualty of power. Peddling fictions is the way to preserve power, and a lie repeated over and over morphs into the kind of 'truth' that serves power.

JRR Tolkien offered a different point of view and maintained that the most effective medium of truth is the fantasy story. But this only works as long as the receiver knows that the story is fantasy and its truths lie beneath the scaffolding of the fiction. Jesus practised the same narrative technique inventing fiction in his parables to convey life-giving truths. Here is a case where honest fact-checking would enable us to see through the surface fiction to the truth underneath.

Today's Scripture points us beyond knowledge to wisdom, wisdom that can be authenticated by experience and the lives of people of integrity, bearing in mind that integrity is a life based on values and not on personal gain or looking good.



Honesty is the fastest way to prevent a mistake from turning into a failure.

James Altucher (American entrepreneur, company founder, author)



Doctor to patient: 'Your X-ray showed a broken rib, but we fixed it with Photoshop.'

Laurie Woods