

28th Sunday In Ordinary Time—Year B

Book of Wisdom 7.7-11

Letter to the Hebrews 4.12-13

Mark 10.17-30

I expect none of you knew my father. He died in January 2004, one month short of his 88th birthday. My father was born in Ontario, but he grew up in the small farming community of St. Lina, Alberta, which is north of St. Paul. My father's formal education ended in the sixth grade and, like many young men of his time and place, he then worked as a farmhand. Work took precedence over school. Given my father's lack of formal education, he tended, at least according to my brothers and I, to hold to some provincial attitudes. My father, however, was rarely wrong in his understanding of the larger issues of life, things like love of family and friends, loyalty and generosity. He rarely made a misstep in these areas.

What my father lacked in knowledge drawn from a formal education, he made up for in his understanding of wisdom. Wisdom is different from knowledge, for knowledge cultivates facts drawn from education and experience, whereas wisdom focuses on answering questions like 'How do I live a good life?', 'What should I believe and how should I act?' and 'What values should I live by to live a good life?' My father's reflection on these questions led him to acquire several succinct adages, like "Elvis Presley had enough money to enable himself to buy 12 Cadillacs in one afternoon, but he could only drive one at a time". I'm convinced that if the *Book of Proverbs*, one of a collection of Old Testament books known as the Wisdom Books, had been written today, that adage would have been included in it.

The acquisition and application of wisdom in one's life is front and centre in today's scripture readings. In the Old Testament, wisdom is often personified and described with the pronoun "she" to remind men that wisdom is something to be greatly desired. The First Reading reminds us that wisdom is more desirable than precious stones, which represent great wealth, because her value is more long-lasting. The speaker in this passage is understood to be King Solomon, who is considered the perfect archetype of the seeker of wisdom.

In the *First Book of Kings*, Solomon as a young man received a vision of God in a dream, where God asked him "what should I give you?" Solomon responded by requesting "an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil." God was pleased that Solomon asked for this and said, "I give you a wise and discerning mind" and then added: *I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor all your life.*" God then said to Solomon that he will also give him long life, provided he follows his commandments as David his father did.

The point here is clear: pursue wisdom first, because the acquisition of wealth, honours, accolades and prestige are useless on their own if wisdom is not present to direct them. You may as well buy a Lamborghini bereft of an engine; it looks fancy, but it's not taking you anywhere.

Now it may be the case that acquiring wisdom may not necessarily mean that wealth, fame and long life will follow. But if one has wisdom, one can determine that all these other qualities are not necessary for a happy and contented life. And if these qualities follow the acquisition of wisdom, they will then find their proper place in one's life, provided wisdom is predominant and directing them.

The man in the Gospel Reading has traditionally been known as the *Rich Young Man*. There is no reference in this Gospel passage to this man's age or youthfulness, but it's safe to assume that he is young. The question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" is a question best asked by one whose life is not yet hemmed in by commitments and responsibilities. This man is probably unattached and has enough wealth to provide him with a lot of life options. He is asking Jesus, who he rightly recognizes as a source of wisdom, what he needs to do to fulfil the requirements needed to be a citizen of the Kingdom of God and inheritor of eternal life.

This is the picture of a very good man. He is very conscientious and devout and would probably be a model father, husband and citizen. Jesus recognizes the man's innate goodness and loves him. That word 'love' is important here. Because Jesus loved him, he wanted him to experience the great joy of being a citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven. He thus challenges him, out of that love, to go beyond the common and the ordinary means to find salvation, and to embrace the Kingdom of God at a heroic level. Jesus wants him to go from being just a good man to becoming a saint. As Jesus doesn't want the young man to be burdened by any encumbrances that would impede a single-minded pursuit of the Kingdom of God, Jesus challenged him to "sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, then come follow me."

We then find another important word in this Gospel Reading—'grieve'. The young man grieved because he was not up to the challenge put before him by Jesus. He grieves because he knows that Jesus is right! If he surrenders all his material possessions, he will have treasure in heaven and eternal life. He knows this but cannot give up his possessions for lack of detachment. He is grieving the man he could have been, but cannot be, because of his attachments. He will go away still a good man, but not a great one. He will never be a saint.

Before Cardinal Archbishop Thomas Collins became the Archbishop of Toronto, he was my Scripture teacher at St. Peter's Seminary in London, Ontario. (That's the full extend of any names-dropping I'll engage in today). On September 27th, he spoke to a gathering of bishops, priests and seminarians in Phoenix, Arizona, reminding them that in their struggle to attain holiness, "you must become fire." This phrase is drawn from a story where, in the early Church,

a man approached his spiritual director about his struggle with apathy in his pursuit of holiness. The spiritual director, upon hearing this, purportedly raised his hand and put his fingers together. Miraculously, a flame appeared above his fingers. The spiritual director then said, “why don’t you become fire?” The point this director and Cardinal Collins were making was clear: move beyond being a common and mundane Christian, stop being a common Catholic and become a great Catholic, a saintly Catholic.

It is known that this Gospel passage inspired two young men to do just that. In Egypt during the third century, a man named Anthony, after reflecting on this Gospel message, sold his inherited property, gave the money to the poor, and went off to the desert to become a Christian hermit. His example inspired other men to follow him, and from this Christian monasticism was born. The monastic life that St. Anthony inspired made its way West, and in Europe monasteries became spiritual, artistic, cultural, educational and agricultural centres and catalysts for Christian civilization during the Dark Ages.

This Gospel passage also inspired a rich young man named Francis, who lived in the 11th century, to renounce his privileged upbringing in Assisi, sell all his possessions and give them to the poor. He then founded a religious order that bears his name, the Franciscans, and reformed the Church of their day, and his Order continues the work of proclaiming the Gospel to the present day. St. Anthony of the Desert and St. Francis of Assisi became fire, and the Church, and the world, are better for it.

Cardinal Collins call to his fellow clergymen to “become fire” is not just an antidote to the clergy scandals presently infecting our Church, but also a challenge to all Catholics to live out their Christian faith at an extraordinary level. Resolve this Gospel passage, not by going away and grieving a lost opportunity, but by embracing it and moving beyond goodness to greatness. To, with the assistance of wisdom, move beyond being an average Christian to a saintly Christian. To be like fire.