

Personal Notes
060820 Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time 119B
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The readings for this Sunday are about searching out and finding the will of God through the reception of Wisdom and Holy Communion. The way things are, is not necessarily what God wants. Eucharistic prayer enables the Faithful to contemplate the changes God wants. The readings for this Sunday support the type of changes sought by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (N.A.A.C.P.).

The focus on Wisdom begins with Proverbs encouraging Israel to pay attention to God, the source of all Wisdom. Psalm 34 continues in the vein of searching for how to obey God as the meaning of Wisdom. Ephesians gets downright nasty towards those who willingly refuse to learn. Learning is the prerequisite for any Wisdom. The Gospel is about learning through the Eucharist. All of the readings work to make Wisdom attractive.

Proverbs 9 adopts an attractiveness of sexiness toward a young man.¹ Proverbs portrays Wisdom as a female goddess. In the Hebrew, Wisdom is a plural noun, identifying the name of a deity. Like an attractive woman, the deity is calling out to all who would listen.² “Let whoever is simple turn in here; to the one who lacks understanding...” Wisdom beckons. (Proverbs 9:4) Wisdom has a nice house; she is setting the table; she extends herself to all who hear her “from the heights out over the city.” (Proverbs 9:3)

People who refuse to pay attention, and refuse to “forsake foolishness” (Proverbs 9:6), and open their minds, but, rather, close their minds in some sort of “holy obedience,” personally bother me. What I fear is the bishop, who is pastor of his flock and, in a spirit of clerical culture, may not want anyone thinking thoughts he has not already thought and approved. Blowing like the wind, Wisdom available and found everywhere, not only with the bishop. This availability is especially important for those trampled by racism, sexism, indeed, even by clericalism. Sometimes, especially in this era of hierarchical scandal, listening to the bishops of today is like listening to the Pharisees of yesterday. Proverbs 9:6 words it well to say, “Forsake foolishness that you may live; advance in the way of understanding.”

Psalm 34 is a panegyric to Wisdom. Psalm 34 is a model of that intellectual discipline required to pursue Wisdom. Not only is the 34th Psalm a twenty-two line

¹ Richard Clifford, S.J., and Khaled Anatolios, “Christian Salvation: Biblical and Theological Perspectives,” Theological Studies, Vol. 66, No. 4 (December 2005) 761.

² Margaret Barker, The Great High Priest: The Temple Roots of Christian Liturgy (London: T & T Clark International: *A Continuum imprint*, 2003) 235.

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acrostic (one line for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet),³ but the letters for Wisdom also carefully frame the text of the poem. Anthony R. Ceresko, O.S.F.S. looked for the three Hebrew letters for Wisdom and found them framing the poem.⁴ To me, this means that God is calling the Church and the People of God as Church, to honor what happens between the research universities and kindergarten and everything in between. Wisdom is a practical search for truth in the midst of counter-cultural politics, politics of both Church and state.

Some vocations deliberately turn off the mental discipline required to think. When doing that, the risk is exchanging obedience to the holy will of God to obedience to the unholy will of humans. How are religious and military, who take vows of obedience, to deal with the hierarchy should it become imprudent or, worse, sinful?

Vows of obedience require at least two ways of understanding: theoretical and practical. In practice, obedience never matches theory. Questioning obedience to the hierarchy belongs to the realm of prudence and practice. Theoretical obedience is acceptable, unless one is ordered to commit sin, as seems to have happened in the current scandal of hierarchical abuse. The scandal is hierarchic, not sexual.

Returning to the theme of the attractiveness of Wisdom and beginning a trend toward Wisdom found in the Eucharist, the Lectionary uses the antiphon, Psalm 34:9a, "Taste...the goodness of the Lord." Wisdom is so wonderful that it can be tasted.⁵ Somehow, "when the poor one called out, the LORD heard" (Psalm 34:7a). That the LORD hears is especially meaningful when one enters the final stages of old age and becomes face-to-face with earthly demise. The Eucharist offers hope for that final stage of life.

The Eucharistic note of Ephesians 5:20 is easy to miss. "Giving thanks" in the Greek is the root word for Eucharist. The Greek offers a lot for Ephesians 5:15-20. The beginning, "Brothers and sisters" is an inconsistent hierarchical dictate used to begin Lectionary epistles. Sometimes the hierarchy simply uses ""Brothers."

³ Lawrence Boadt, C.S.P., "The Use of "Panels" in the Structure of Psalms 73-78," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 66, No 4 (October 2004) 537.

⁴ Anthony R. Ceresko, O.S.F.S., "Endings and Beginnings: Alphabetic Thinking and the Shaping of Psalms 106 and 150," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 68, No. 1 (January 2006) 33.

⁵ Margaret Barker, The Great High Priest: The Temple Roots of Christian Liturgy (London: T & T Clark International: *A Continuum imprint*, 2003) 135.

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Ephesians 5:16 uses the Greek word for *time* in “making the most of the opportunity.” Time is the most precious thing I have. When people waste my time, especially by poorly prepared and excessively drawn out liturgies, I tend to become angry. Interestingly, the liturgies at the Bethlehem Monastery of the Poor Clares in New Kent County, Virginia, while often sponsoring long liturgies, never draw them out with useless ceremony. Sometimes celebrants, however, do take advantage of being the center of attention and lollygag in their spotlight. Learning requires time, best not wasted dawdling around.

Learned celebrants, used to that mental discipline required for Wisdom, seldom dawdle. Sixty years ago, at least, the learned Jesuits used to teach that anyone taking more than thirty minutes for a daily Mass was dawdling. Today, that still seems to be the case, at least to me. It is understood that a thirty-minute Mass is rare.

Learning not only takes mental discipline, but learning also takes time and resources. When Ephesians 5:17 admonishes, “do not continue in ignorance, but try to understand what is the will of the Lord,” Ephesians implicitly requires a commitment of resources. That is why the Faithful support the seminary system.

Sometimes, clerics regard their seminary experience as a culmination of their learning experience, rather than as the matriculation or beginning of what they will unfold during their lives. For example, I do not think there is a priest on the Virginia Peninsula willing to read the Catholic Biblical Quarterly. Such a lack of Catholic Bible Study does disturb me for whatever reason it occurs.

Debauchery debilitates time and resources. Ephesians 5:18 refers to debauchery, the result of getting drunk on wine and losing the ability to focus the mind on Wisdom. *Debauchery* means *extreme indulgence in sensuality*. I would call debauchery disorder and chaos, something overcome by reason and wisdom. “Taste and see the goodness of the Lord” is about turning debauchery into wisdom, by understanding that in the divine plan, there is a reason for everything.

Racial prejudice is an area of human endeavor that requires Faith born of mental discipline to find Wisdom in the divine plan. Ephesians 5:19, “spiritual songs” is the root for African-American spirituals,⁶ the source of finding Wisdom in the midst of racism. In the same verse, “playing” means playing the harp rather than playing a

⁶ Wilma Ann Bailey, “The Sorrow Songs: Laments from Ancient Israel and the African American Diaspora,” in Yet with a Steady Beat: Contemporary U.S. Afrocentric Biblical Interpretation, Randall C. Bailey, ed., (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003) 66.

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game. Such playing requires skill, in a word Wisdom, in a very practical concrete sense.

The Gospel takes the mind through worldly wisdom toward holy Wisdom.⁷ Borrowing from the Book of Wisdom, Jesus proclaims, “whoever eats this bread will live forever” (John 6:51). The Gospel is presenting the Eucharist as the central of seven signs relating to the Book of Wisdom. The sign in Wisdom is sending manna.⁸

In the next verse, Jesus insists on Eucharistic Wisdom. “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you” (John 6:52). The issue is the reality of substance and transubstantiation. While the reality of substance is within the bounds of human reason, transubstantiation requires divine intervention.

While anyone can go to Communion, whether educated or not, Ephesians 5:17 encourages, “do not continue in ignorance.” Too often clerical culture feels threatened by the educated Faithful. Parish Councils and the lack thereof, offer evidence for this sense of threat, rather than welcome.

This Richmond Diocese institutionalizes the threat hierarchal power associates with underlings thinking. The duty of the “Diocesan Theologian” is to censor, rather than expand, disapproved speech to include approved speech. Silencing a speaker is a political act of power. Dialoging, on the other hand, is trying “to understand what is the will of the Lord” (Ephesians 5:17).

These readings are about the discipline needed to try to understand Wisdom in the will of God. Proverbs is not only about the excitement of finding things out, but also about the excitement of realizing that, all knowledge of created things reflects the Creator. Psalm 34 extends that excitement to finding out directly about God. Ephesians is about the discipline required to make an effort to discover what God wants. The Gospel of John rests in the wisdom of the Eucharist, contemplating the Wisdom of God in the truth of all creation.

For more on sources see the Appendix file. Personal Notes are on the web site at www.western-civilization.com/CBQ/Personal%20Notes

⁷ Stanley B. Marrow, “Κοσμος in John,” the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 64, No. 1 (January 2002) 97.

⁸ Douglas K. Clark, “Signs in Wisdom and John,” the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 45, No. 2 (April 1983) 205, 206.