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We approach the sacred texts today by reminding ourselves that Jesus is the face of God made visible, the wisdom of God revealed and the One who daily challenges the quality of our discipleship. Much of the Lucan Gospel is set against the backdrop of a journey. Jesus and his disciples were slowly but surely making their way to Jerusalem, where his reason for being would be revealed to all. On their way, Jesus continued the formation of his disciples, telling of both the blessings and the struggles entailed in following him. As he teaches, Jesus' words and wisdom reach out to us across the centuries and make us disciples, as well, if we listen and are willing to learn and commit ourselves to him today in every way.

Just as Jesus' teaching offered an ultimatum of sorts to his first disciples, so also does he extend the same choice to us. As Roland J. Faley has put it, today's liturgy gives us an occasion to pause and think (*Footprints on the Mountain*, Paulist Press, New York: 1994). We are advised to weigh carefully the cost of discipleship before setting out to follow Jesus on the journey. Ours is not a safe and secure religion demanding only our Sunday-morning attention and devotion. To take it seriously is to walk a rocky path. This struggle notwithstanding, we might do well to recall what the ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu once said: "The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." This single step can be a very small one, not a quantum leap. Nevertheless, these small steps are necessary to move us forward toward the

goal of professing and witnessing to Jesus with our lips as well as our lives.

Since the journey of discipleship is comprised of countless small steps in the right direction and with the right motive, we do well to ponder the sacred texts for guidance. In today's first reading from Wisdom, the sapiential author encourages us with the knowledge that we are not left alone to founder on our way. Knowing both our talents and our limitations, God sends the Holy Spirit from on high so we can "trust" that our paths will be made straight (Wis 9:18).

In today's second reading from Paul's personal letter to Philemon, Paul could have made a bold and sweeping statement condemning slavery as an injustice that militated against the God-given dignity of every human being. But Paul thought it wise and more feasible to take small steps. He implored Philemon to take back the runaway slave Onesimus "as a brother, beloved especially to me, but even more to you, as a man and in the Lord" (v. 16). Little steps, like accepting and loving him as a beloved brother rather than a slave, would eventually (but none too soon) lead to the abolition of slavery. Sadly, some within the human community have yet to take even the first small step in this direction. Paul's message needs further repetition and implementation.

Although the steps described by the Lucan Jesus in today's Gospel may appear to be drastic because they are explained with images like hating one's family, the parables included in the Gospel offer clarification. "The idea is that the priority in the Christian life must go to the claim of Christ and all other considerations are secondary, even those of family" (Roland J. Faley, *op. cit.*).

Like the builder of the tower and the king marching into battle, disciples must understand what they are about — what are the costs, what are the consequences, and do I have what it takes to be a disciple and see the journey through to the end? Left to our own devices, the answer to this question would, unfortunately, be a negative one. However, we are not alone. With God and with grace, with Jesus' constant presence and guidance in the person of the Holy Spirit, we are empowered to take one step at a time. With God and with grace, we can learn to put on the mind of Christ and be fired by the Holy Spirit to take on our ministry one person, one challenge at a time. With God and with grace, we can keep our priorities straight and pool our resources with those of other disciples, always keeping uppermost, in mind and heart, the claim of Jesus in our lives. One step, one day at a time.

## **WISDOM 9:13-18b**

Latest of all the Old Testament scriptures, the Book of Wisdom was written in Alexandria about two generations before Christ — ca. 60 B.C.E — by a Greek-speaking Jew familiar with the Greek classics, e.g., Homer, Plato and the Stoics. Because he lived in the intellectual center of his day, the ancient author was able to avail himself of a wealth of knowledge. Alexandria, founded by Alexander the Great in 331 B.C.E., could boast of a world-famous museum and a library with more than 400,000 volumes. A seaport city, Alexandria was the capital of the Ptolemaic dynasty and later became the seat of Rome in Egypt. The third largest city in the ancient Near Eastern world, Alexandria was home to the largest concentration of Jews in the diaspora. It was there that the Hebrew scriptures were translated into Greek, a translation known as the Septuagint (LXX).

To Jewish readers, the Book of Wisdom was intended to encourage their fidelity to monotheism and to their traditional values in the midst of a Hellenist environment. For its Greek audience, Wisdom offered a sophisticated presentation of Jewish religion in their own language, thought patterns and literary style.

Today's first reading is based on the purported author of Wisdom and Israel's greatest sage, Solomon, and refers to that moment in his reign when God promised him anything he asked for in prayer (see 1 Kings 3:6-9 and 2 Chron 1:8-10). To his credit, Solomon asked for wisdom so that he might govern God's people worthily. In this text, the ancient author has expanded Solomon's prayer and deepened its theology. Couched within a literary inclusion (v. 13, 17: "counsel"), the prayer reflects a first-century B.C.E. Greek philosophy that attributed humankind's inability to know God's intentions (will, plans) to the notion that the mortal body weighs down the mind or spirit. Because this notion is so reminiscent of Plato's thought (see *Phaedo* 30.81c), the author of Wisdom has been accused by some of dualistic leanings. Adherents of dualism make a sharp distinction between matter and spirit and regard matter as earthbound and intrinsically evil. While such an idea was not supported in the Hebrew scriptures ("and God saw all that was created and it was good," Gen 1:31), the dualistic notions of certain Greek philosophies did have a lasting and sometimes detrimental influence on later theologies.

Not included in the Palestinian or Protestant canons, the Book of Wisdom nevertheless includes some very significant doctrines. Departing from traditional views, the ancient author insisted that the misfortunes suffered by human beings

are not a mark of divine displeasure. Nor should suffering be understood as a punishment for sin. Agreeing with the message of Job and Qoheleth, the sapiential author understood that virtue is not always rewarded in this life, nor is evil always punished. Death is not an affliction but a trial to be endured in order to be with God (Wis 3:5ff). This insight about the afterlife and immortality (Wis 3:4; 4:1; 8:13, 17; 15:3) continues to give hope to all who believe.

### **PHILEMON 9-10, 12-17**

A priceless and insightful gem, Philemon represents the only truly personal letter in the Christian scriptures, addressed from one individual to another and occasioned by personal concerns. Philemon was a prominent member of the church at Colossae; the community there met in his home for prayer and fellowship. Onesimus, a slave in Philemon's household, had run away and may have been guilty of stealing something of value (vv. 11, 18). Onesimus made his way to Paul, who was in prison, probably in Ephesus (ca. 54-55 C.E.), and while they were together, the slave was converted to Christ. The bond between Paul and Onesimus grew, such that the apostle referred to Onesimus as "my child whose father I have become in my imprisonment" (v. 10). Onesimus, whose name means "useful," had indeed become so, and Paul wished him to stay on in order to assist him in his ministry.

Nevertheless, Paul acknowledged Philemon's prerogative as the slave's master and sent him back. However, Paul appealed to Philemon to accept Onesimus no longer as a slave but as a beloved brother in the Lord. Paul understood that if an institution like slavery is to be abolished, it must begin with small steps, one person, one heart at a time.

Slavery was a major institution in the ancient world. There were royal or crown slaves who served kings and emperors. There were also temple slaves who served the cultic officials. Even ordinary people had slaves who served as domestic help. Most slaves were taken as booty in war; others were forced into slavery due to debt. Still others sold themselves into slavery in order to earn a living, pay debts, etc. (Lev 25:39; Exod 21:5-6; Deut 15:16-17; 1 Kings 9:21; Num 31:25-47). Whatever the reason Onesimus became enslaved, it is clear that Paul loved him as an equal, and he urged Philemon to do likewise.

By calling upon Philemon to accept Onesimus as a brother, Paul sought to transform their relationship from one of legality to love. Slaves were regarded as living tools

throughout the Roman Empire. As such, their masters had absolute power over them, even as to whether they were allowed to live or not. Legally, Philemon could have put Onesimus to death or, at the very least, could have branded the runaway with an “F” for *fugitivus* on his forehead so that all might see and know his “crime.” But Paul challenged the slave owner to look beyond the law and to allow his faith in Jesus to let him see the slave with new eyes, the eyes of love. Paul’s words also challenge each of us to allow our belonging to Christ to inspire our actions so that we might make peace, forgive and reconcile with any sister or brother who may have wronged us. Love goes beyond the law.

### **LUKE 14:25-33**

When Jesus called his disciples to follow him, he was not enlisting part-time or seasonal volunteers; he was calling those who would be his own to total, unconditional and persevering commitment. This truth is borne out very clearly in today’s Gospel.

Still en route to Jerusalem, where he would teach the ultimate lesson in discipleship, Jesus is presented here as addressing “great crowds” (v. 25). From this story’s literary context, it appears that Jesus’ words were being directed to those who had been invited to the messianic banquet (Luke 14:21, 23). However, as they would learn, the banquet was just the first step. Those invited would also be asked to drink deeply of the cup of suffering (Luke 32:42), which Jesus would drink to the dregs. Note the invitation was not merely for the Twelve but for all who believe.

Structurally, this Gospel is comprised of a catena of challenges to discipleship, and two parables on the wisdom of being knowledgeable and prepared for the mission. Like many Semitisms, Jesus’ shocking challenge to hate one’s parents, spouse and family is harsh. However, hate in this instance did not mean animosity but detachment in the strongest possible terms. This should not be mistaken for renouncing one’s familial responsibilities, an action for which Jesus castigated the Pharisees (Mark 7:12). Rather, discipleship calls for a reordering of one’s values and priorities so that Jesus is one’s first love, before family, before self (vv. 26, 27).

This love will enable and empower disciples to take up their cross, i.e., to meet, accept and deal with all the demands and challenges inherent in following Jesus. Elsewhere in his Gospel, Luke would add the modifiers “daily” (9:23) and “after me” (23:26) to stress the disciples’ full and ongoing participation in Jesus’ saving death

on the cross.

The parables about the tower builder and the warring king underscore the necessity of knowing the cost of discipleship and the willingness to “pay” that cost fully and freely. Both the tower builder and the warring king had to assess what they needed to complete their individual undertakings successfully. What would be the outlay? What were the risks? For the builder and the king, these questions were answered in terms of materials and manpower. How does the disciple answer these questions? The outlay with regard to discipleship is the complete and unconditional gift of ourselves and our time, talent and treasure. Disciples are also to cultivate wisdom and practical common sense and are to seek out the advice of others, all the while praying to recognize and accept God’s grace as it is given. In the coming weeks, the Lucan Jesus will continue the formation of his disciples. We, for our part, are to listen and learn.

## **Planning: 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)**

**By:** Lawrence Mick

Monday is Labor Day in the United States and Canada. Though the day is often just seen as the last long weekend of summer, it was begun to recognize the contributions of workers and labor unions to the welfare of society. It’s still an important opportunity to remember the dignity of work.

Though political trends and public opinion have turned against labor organizations, Catholic teaching continues to uphold the rights of workers to organize and to seek decent wages and benefits. The continuing shrinkage of the middle class and the growing disparity between the very wealthy and the rest of the populace, which has gotten much attention in this year’s campaigns, is closely linked to the destruction of the unions. Preachers and planners might want to provide some catechesis on those topics this weekend. Some useful sources can be found at these websites:

**[www.icpj.net/resources/Catholic-Teaching-on-Labor.pdf](http://www.icpj.net/resources/Catholic-Teaching-on-Labor.pdf)** and

**[www.usccb.org/upload/Primer-labor-Catholic-social-teaching.pdf](http://www.usccb.org/upload/Primer-labor-Catholic-social-teaching.pdf)**. If

preachers do not address this issue in the homily, planners might arrange to have a handout included in the bulletin or posted on the parish website.

Preachers might well focus on another issue raised directly by the Letter to Philemon. This is the only time in the three-year cycle that we hear from this short book of the New Testament. It directly raises the issue of slavery and, by extension, the ongoing legacy of racism in our country and in the church. This past year has seen a flood of racist and hateful speech from U.S. political candidates and office-holders, commentators and ordinary citizens. Racism is a continuing evil that we need to address regularly.

So this weekend calls us to reflect on the teaching of Jesus and the church on two critical social issues that affect the coming elections in the United States. If you are unsure about the appropriateness of focusing on such issues in church, you might look to the feature article in this September issue of *Celebration* for a longer article by this author that deals with that concern in greater depth. For now, suffice it to say that the Gospel applies to every issue that matters. While we should not use the liturgy or homily to support particular candidates in elections, we must offer guidance on church teaching on the issues of the day.

Planners should include both issues in the general intercessions and might offer a second handout on racism this week or next week. Sources for that topic include [www.loyno.edu/jsri/catholic-social-teaching-cst-and-racism](http://www.loyno.edu/jsri/catholic-social-teaching-cst-and-racism) and [www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/cultural-diversity/african-american/brothers-and-sisters-to-us.cfm](http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/cultural-diversity/african-american/brothers-and-sisters-to-us.cfm).

## **Prayers: 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)**

**By: Jaon DeMerchant**

### **Introduction**

Being a disciple is not for the faint of heart or half-committed. Jesus is clear about requiring detachment — from people and things. We have heard this before in the Gospel. The Gospel makes clear what the demands are. It's up to us to search our own hearts honestly and trust that we will not be left to walk the path alone.

### **Penitential Act**

- Lord Jesus, you challenged the disciples to renounce their possessions: Lord, have mercy.

- Christ Jesus, you called them to take up their crosses and follow you: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you will be with us as we do the same: Lord, have mercy.

### **Prayer of the Faithful**

**Presider** On this journey of discipleship, let us ask God's help for ourselves and for the whole world.

**Minister** For the church and for all Christians striving to be adequate disciples ... we pray,

- For Christians under persecution, who need courage and support to remain faithful ... we pray,
- For those afraid to explore their own commitment to the Gospel ... we pray,
- For all workers, whom we honor on this Labor Day weekend: for all who contribute to our quality of life; for the unemployed and underemployed; for the underpaid and those whose work is demeaning ... we pray,
- For policies that promote fair wages, safe working conditions, humane hours and healthy family life ... we pray,
- For those who advocate on behalf of workers, especially in places where it is dangerous to do so ... we pray,
- For those still suffering the consequences of slavery and racial bias ... we pray,
- For the needy, the sick and the dying among us; and for those who have died ... *(names)* ... we pray,

**Presider** God who is beyond our understanding, we trust that you are with us as we struggle to live as contemporary disciples. For eons, people have turned to you as their refuge and strength. Be with us as we commit ourselves to follow your Son, Jesus. We pray these things in his holy name. Amen.

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