

THE TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY OF THE YEAR - C

On this Sunday Luke gives us more of the teaching of Jesus who is on the road to Jerusalem. Once again this is difficult teaching this time about renouncing everyone we hold dear and giving up our possessions. Not only have we to put our love for Jesus before our friends but our love for Jesus must come before our own family members. When Luke writes about 'hating father, mother, wife....' he is using a Hebrew way of speech, Jesus is asking for total detachment. In the first reading from Wisdom we learn how difficult it is to determine the mind of God. In the second reading, from a short and little known letter to Philemon, Paul pleads for a runaway slave asking his master to take him back as a brother in Christ.

The **First Reading** is from the book of Wisdom. The wisdom literature in the Bible comes after the historical books and comprises the books of Job, the Psalms, the Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Songs, the Book of Wisdom and Ecclesiasticus. Wisdom literature flourished throughout the ancient East, it treats of the meaning of life and offers a recipe for successful living. Wisdom literature in Israel came from the same soil and was absorbed in the individual and his destiny but was viewed in the clearer light of the religion of Yahweh. Real wisdom is found in the fear of God since God alone is wise. Wisdom is an outpouring of the glory of the Almighty, an image of his perfection. Wisdom is sure to bring happiness and folly, ruin. This is the doctrine on which the teaching of wisdom is based. All this teaching was preparing for the revelation of Wisdom incarnate as Matthew says: "here is someone greater than Solomon."

The book of Wisdom itself may be divided as follows, the first section, ch.1-5, defines the function of wisdom in man's destiny; the second section, ch.6-9, treats of the origin and nature of wisdom; the last section, ch.10-19, celebrates the part played by Wisdom and by God in the history of the chosen people. The authorship is attributed to Solomon, the wisest king in Israel. The author was an Alexandrian Jew who wrote towards the middle of the 1st century B.C., he commends wisdom, born of God, obtained by prayer, the mainspring of all the virtues. This life is seen as a preparation for another in which the virtuous live with God and the wicked are punished. He sees Wisdom as an attribute of God.

The reading, 9.13-18, is the third part of king Solomon's prayer for Wisdom but the prayer extends to embrace the whole human condition. So the reading begins asking: 'What man can know the intentions of God? Who can divine the will of the Lord?' Man's reasoning is not capable of such it is inadequate for the task, unstable because of the weight of the human condition. The image of the 'tent' in the reading evokes the precariousness of human existence. Learning about the things of earth is difficult enough the heavens are beyond our reach, we can only discover the will of God because he has sent his Spirit of Wisdom. Wisdom has taught what pleases God and our paths have been straightened and we are saved.

The **Responsorial Psalm**, Psalm 89.3-6,12-14,17, as a reflection on the first reading reminds us of our human frailty. We are no more than the dust from which we came time has little meaning with God. In the second verse we are likened to the grasses of the field. The psalmist prays that we may know the shortness of life which will give us wisdom. We pray for God's faithful love for his favour that our work may be confirmed.

The **Second Reading** is from the short letter to Philemon who was a slave owner and one of his slaves, Onesimus, had absconded, met Paul and been received into the Church. Paul writes in a gentle affectionate way to Philemon asking him to receive Onesimus back as a fellow Christian.

The reading, 9-19,12-17 gives us the heart of the letter written by Paul in captivity in Rome (61-63). Onesimus is mentioned in the letter to the Colossians because Philemon and his slave lived in Colossae. In the letter Paul is sending Onesimus, 'that dear and trustworthy brother who is a fellow citizen of yours,' with the disciple Tychicus, to give the Colossians news about Paul. (Col.4.7-9) Paul is writing the letter saying he is Onesimus' father because he received him into the Church. Paul found him a very useful disciple and would like to keep him but he acknowledges that Onesimus belongs to Philemon and so he returns him to his master. Paul says Philemon has been deprived of Onesimus' services but Paul maintains that God allowed Onesimus to escape so that everyone might subsequently benefit. Now Philemon can have Onesimus back as a dear brother. Paul uses the phrase 'blood brother' by which Paul means Onesimus is a fellow human being 'as well as a brother in the Lord.' Since they, Paul, Philemon and Onesimus, are fellow Christians Paul asks that Onesimus be welcomed back as if it were Paul himself arriving.