

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time - A

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

1st Reading - 1 Kings 3:5, 7-12

The books of Kings are the fourth part of what tradition calls the Former Prophets (Joshua, Judges, 1st & 2nd Samuel, 1st & 2nd Kings). The division between the books of Samuel and the books of Kings is arbitrary and varies in ancient manuscripts. The division between 1st and 2nd Kings is even more arbitrary, disrupting the account of the reign of Ahaziah of Israel. In fact, 1st and 2nd Kings form one continuous work.

It has become standard in scholarly studies to refer to the Former Prophets as the “deuteronomistic history” and to deem it the product of a single school, if not a single author. It is not a work of political or social history, however, but of theological history. It recounts, from a consistent theological point of view, Israel’s life in its own land from the occupation under Joshua to the Babylonian exile. It is less interested in accurately chronicling events, no matter how important they may seem to the modern historian, than in explaining the tragic fate of Yahweh’s people. The sources used by the sacred writer(s) are many and varied, ranging from popular tales (1 Kings 3:16-27), and miracle stories (2 Kings 2) to archival records (1 Kings 4:7-19). In Kings, the sacred writer(s) cite three sources by name and repeatedly refer the reader to them for further information: *The Acts of Solomon*, *The Chronicles of the Kings of Judah*, and *The Chronicles of the Kings of Israel*. Unfortunately, all three sources are now lost.

It is not certain when the sacred writer (s) compiled the sources into the theological narrative we have today. The final version is believed to date from between 560 and 538 B.C.

Our reading today comes from the beginning of Solomon’s reign as king and it tells us that Yahweh is pleased with Solomon.

⁵ [T]he LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream at night.

Revelation by dream has an extensive biblical and extra-biblical background.

God said, "Ask something of me and I will give it to you." [Solomon answered:] ⁷"O LORD, my God, you have made me, your servant, king to succeed my father David; but I am a mere youth, not knowing at all how to act.

Literally, “not knowing at all how to go out or come in” which is a Hebrew phrase to express all that a man does.

⁸ I serve you in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a people so vast that it cannot be numbered or counted. ⁹ Give your servant, therefore, an understanding heart to judge your people and to distinguish right from wrong.

He prays for judicial wisdom; the ability to judge well when cases are appealed to him as supreme arbiter of justice in the kingdom. "Heart" in Hebrew usually connotes mental rather than emotional faculties (the gut or bowels).

For who is able to govern this vast people of yours?" ¹⁰ The LORD was pleased that Solomon made this request. ¹¹ So God said to him: "Because you have asked for this--not for a long life for yourself, nor for riches, nor for the life of your enemies, but for understanding so that you may know what is right – ¹² I do as you requested. I give you a heart so wise and understanding that there has never been anyone like you up to now, and after you there will come no one to equal you."

Because Solomon's request is an unselfish request – one which serves for the benefit of the people, God grants his request. In the verses immediately following today's reading, God, as reward for Solomon's unselfish request, also grants him two of the three things he hadn't asked for: riches and honors above all other kings, and long life; on the condition that he follow the faithful example of David.

2nd Reading - Romans 8:28-30

As we continue our study of the Book of Romans, begin where last week's reading ended. Recall that this is Saint Paul's description of the future glory that awaits those who live the Christian life empowered by the Spirit

²⁸ We know that all things work for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

God cooperates in all things with those who love Him; this is the realization of His loving plan of salvation. God's purpose and plan are what is really behind all that happens to Christians, for He is really in control.

"To be called according to God's purpose is to be called according to the will. But is this the will of the one who calls or the will of those who are called? Naturally, every impulse which leads to righteousness comes from God the Father. Christ Himself once said: 'No one can come to me unless the Father draws him' (John 6:44). Nevertheless it is not wrong to say that some are called according to God's purpose and according to their own intentions as well." [Saint Cyril of Alexandria (A.D. 430), *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* 8,29]

²⁹ For those he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, so that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰ And those he predestined he also called; and those he called he also justified; and those he justified he also glorified.

The doctrine of predestination is: "God, by His eternal resolve of will, has predestined certain men to eternal blessedness." This doctrine is based on our reading today. This doesn't mean that those so favored can not cast aside their salvation if they so will, and/or that those not so favored can not still be saved.

God desires the salvation of all mankind. This is shown in the beginning of the Book of Genesis where the man and the woman are in the garden, able to speak to God face-to-face. This is the destiny which God wants for us all. Like our first parents, we also have a free will to choose to obey Him or not. God doesn't interfere with that choice. This is why Saint Paul tells us in Philippians 2:12 "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (KJV). God has given each of us a free will, and He will do nothing to interfere with it.

The Catholic teaching on predestination is in direct contrast to the teaching of Protestant reformer John Calvin which is described in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536):

"God's eternal decree, by which he compacted with himself what he wills to become of each man . . . eternal life is foreordained for some, eternal damnation for others. Therefore, as any man has been created to one or the other of these ends, we speak of him as predestined to life or to death."

As can be seen from the following quotation from one of the Early Church Fathers, the teaching of Calvin was not the understanding of the Early Church:

"Those whom He predestined, those also did He call; and those whom He called, those also did He justify; and those whom He justified, those also did He glorify. Those whose resolve He foreknew, He predestined from the beginning. Predestining them, He did also call them. Calling them, He justified them by Baptism; and justifying them, He glorified them, calling them sons and bestowing on them the grace of the Holy Spirit. But no one would say that His foreknowledge is the cause of this: for His foreknowledge does not accomplish such things as these. Rather, God, since His is God, does see from afar those things that are going to be. . . . The God of the Universe, since He is God, sees all things from afar. Assuredly this imposes no necessity on anyone of practicing virtue, nor on anyone of doing evil. For if a man be compelled to either course, it is not right that he be either praised and crowned, or condemned to punishment. If God is just, as just He be, He encourages to those things that are good, and dissuades from the contrary; and He praises those who do good, and punishes those who voluntarily embrace evil." [Theodoret of Cyr (ca. A.D. 440), *Interpretation of the Fourteen Epistles of Paul* Romans 8:30]

Gospel - Matthew 13:44-52

For the past two weeks we have heard Jesus teaching in parables. We have heard of the mustard seed, the sower (with different types of soil), the weeds among the wheat, and the leaven. The roots of the parable as a literary form lie in the Old Testament; particularly in the wisdom literature, and also in rabbinical literature (some two thousand have been counted). The fictitious anecdote leads the listener to concede a point that he does not immediately recognize as pertaining to himself. The story also sharpens the curiosity and attracts attention. The rabbinical parables are told in answer to a question and show that the scope of the answer is broader than the one who asked the question perceived. These purposes are all apparent in the parables of Jesus. Today we complete Jesus' telling of parables in chapter 13 of the Gospel of Matthew with the parables of the Hidden Treasure, the Pearl, and the Net.

[Jesus said to his disciples:] ⁴⁴ "The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure buried in a field,

which a person finds and hides again,

Ever wonder how the treasure got there? In the ancient world there was always danger of invasion or plundering. Many householders buried their savings in the hope of returning after the danger had passed. Some didn't return.

and out of joy goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

The kingdom of God is such a priceless treasure that a wise man would gladly give all for the chance to seize it; it is the chance of a lifetime. Half measures will not do for the kingdom of God. Jesus passes no judgement on the ethics of the finder, but uses his avarice as an example of the zeal with which the believer should pursue the reign at any price.

⁴⁵ Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant searching for fine pearls. ⁴⁶ When he finds a pearl of great price, he goes and sells all that he has and buys it.

The pearl merchant similarly puts all his possessions in the one investment that he knows will repay him most handsomely.

⁴⁷ Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net thrown into the sea, which collects fish of every kind. ⁴⁸ When it is full they haul it ashore and sit down to put what is good into buckets. What is bad they throw away. ⁴⁹ Thus it will be at the end of the age. The angels will go out and separate the wicked from the righteous ⁵⁰ and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth.

This parable is very close to the weeds and the wheat which we heard last week. The Church is not entirely a community of the elect; it has unfaithful members. God will tolerate such members in the Church as he tolerates them in the world at large; but the judgement will determine the final destiny of the righteous and the wicked.

⁵¹ "Do you understand all these things?" They answered, "Yes."

In Matthew, understanding is a characteristic of a good disciple.

⁵² And he replied, "Then every scribe who has been instructed in the kingdom of heaven is like the head of a household who brings from his storeroom both the new and the old."

The scribe who has become a disciple will employ both the old, the Law and the Prophets, and the new, the gospel. Neither is sufficient without the other; the gospel is the fulfillment of the Law and the Prophets.