

19th Sunday in Ordinary Time - C

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 - Wisdom 18:6-9

The Book of Wisdom, also known as the Wisdom of Solomon, is listed in the Muratorian Fragment [the oldest (second century) listing of writings approved as Scripture for use in the Church of Rome] as a New Testament book. The book is not in the Hebrew canon and it is certain that Greek was the original language. It was certainly written after the completion of the Septuagint (middle of the 2nd century B.C.) and earlier than the New Testament. It is thought to date from the middle of the first century B.C. which would make it the last of the Old Testament books to be written. Believed to have been composed in Alexandria, Egypt, the author certainly isn't Solomon and his identity remains unknown. All efforts to identify the author have been futile and the most that can be said is that he was a devout, Greek speaking Jew, acquainted to some extent with Greek philosophy and culture.

The book divides into two parts: The first part (1:1 through 11:1) appears to be a public address which sings the praises of Wisdom. The second part (11:2 through the end) is a midrash (a Jewish method of searching the Scriptures with a view to discovering the deeper meaning held to underlie the most minute details contained in the sacred text) in homily form about God's fidelity to His people in the exodus. Today's reading concerns the tenth plague and the exodus by which God punished the Egyptians and glorified Israel.

⁶ That night [of the Passover] was known beforehand to our fathers, that, with sure knowledge of the oaths in which they put their faith, they might have courage.

The patriarchs [Abram (Genesis 15:13-34), Jacob (Genesis 46:3-4), etc.] to whom God swore He would deliver their descendants.

⁷ Your people awaited the salvation of the just and the destruction of their foes. ⁸ For when you punished our adversaries, in this you glorified us whom you had summoned.

Chosen – from all the peoples of the earth.

⁹ For in secret the holy children of the good were offering sacrifice

The Passover.

and putting into effect with one accord the divine institution,

The Passover meal created a family which celebrated with a religious unity.

That your holy ones should share alike the same good things and dangers, having previously sung the praises of the fathers.

2nd Reading - Hebrews 11:1-2, 8-19

Today we begin a study of the Book of Hebrews. The last time we studied Hebrews in any depth was the 27th through 33rd Sundays in Ordinary Time in Cycle B. Today we take up our study essentially where we left off at that time.

The epistles are arranged in the Bible first by author, and then in order of descending length. Hebrews appears after the letters of Paul and before the Epistle of James. This is because although early tradition, in the main, attributed this text to Saint Paul, the western church did not accept Pauline authorship until the 4th century. The letter's canonicity is not in doubt; it was included in the canon by the Council of Trent (April 8, 1546) among the other writings of Saint Paul, although the council chose not to state categorically that it was written by Paul. (Note how the letter is announced for the Mass reading "A reading from the letter to the Hebrews"). At any rate, who wrote it is a secondary question which has nothing to do with matters of faith.

The letter was probably written in Italy after A.D. 63 and before A.D. 70 (somewhere around A.D. 67 would be a good guess). It was obviously written to people whom the author knew to be steeped in the Old Testament, people who in all probability were converts from Judaism, and who may previously have even been priests or Levites. After becoming Christians, because of the difficult circumstances of the time, they had to abandon Jerusalem, the holy city, to seek refuge elsewhere; possibly Caesarea or Antioch. In their exile they look back with nostalgia on the splendor of the cult they played a part in prior to their conversion. They feel deceived and are tempted to give up their new faith, in which they are not yet well grounded. In addition to this they are discontented by the persecution they suffer because of their faith. Obviously, they are in need of help and in particular of clear doctrine to bolster their faith and enable them to cope with temptation to infidelity.

As we learned last year in our study of the letter to the Hebrews, the basic teaching centers on showing the superiority of the Christian religion over Judaism. The arrangement is developed in three stages:

1. Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Son of God, the King of the universe "reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature" and is superior to the angels.
2. Christ is also superior to Moses "as the builder of a house has more honor than the house."
3. Jesus, the Son of God, is the greatest high priest who has passed through the heavens; His priesthood is of the order of Melchizadek, superior to the priesthood of Aaron, from which the Levitical priesthood derived.

Theological faith is closely linked to hope. Today, with this lesson in mind, we hear of the faith of Abraham.

11:1 Faith is the realization of what is hoped for and evidence of things not seen. ² Because of it the ancients were well attested.

“‘Faith is the realization of what is hoped for and evidence of things not seen. Because of it the ancients were well attested.’ Wowee! What an expression he uses! He says, ‘evidence of things not seen!’ It is usual to speak of evidence in regard to things that are very plainly seen. Faith, he says, is the full assurance that is had with things that are seen. Neither is it possible to disbelieve in things that are seen, nor again is it possible for there to be faith unless one is as fully persuaded about things invisible as he is about things most clearly seen. Since objects of hope seem to be unsubstantial, faith favors them with substance; or rather, it does not so favor them, but it is the substance. For example, the resurrection has not come, nor does it exist substantially, but hope makes it subsist in our soul. This is what he means when he says ‘the realization of what is hoped for.’” [Saint John Chrysostom (ca. A.D. 403), *Homilies on the Epistle to the Hebrews* 21,2(4)]

⁸ By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; he went out, not knowing where he was to go. ⁹ By faith he sojourned in the promised land as in a foreign country,

Abraham’s faith is exemplified by his obedience to God’s command to migrate to Canaan (note it is not by faith alone, but by living out that faith that Abraham is declared righteous) and by his confidence that his descendants would possess the land, although he would only be a wanderer in it.

dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs of the same promise;

The faith of Isaac and Jacob is mentioned in passing.

¹⁰ for he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and maker is God.

Abraham’s stay in Canaan is an indication of his realization that his permanent dwelling was not to be anywhere on earth, but in the heavenly city (the heavenly Jerusalem).

¹¹ By faith he received power to generate, even though he was past the normal age--and Sarah herself was sterile – for he thought that the one who had made the promise was trustworthy.

¹² So it was that there came forth from one man, himself as good as dead,

An exaggerated description of Abraham’s advanced age (100) at the time of Isaac’s birth.

descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sands on the seashore.

¹³ All these died in faith. They did not receive what had been promised but saw it and greeted it from afar and acknowledged themselves to be strangers and aliens on earth, ¹⁴ for those who speak thus show that they are seeking a homeland.

“We all look toward the East when we pray; but few know that it is because we are looking for our own former country, Paradise, which God planted in Eden in the East (Genesis 2:8). On the first day of the week, we stand when we pray; but not all of us know why. The reason is that on the day of

the resurrection, by standing at prayer, we remind ourselves of the grace we have received.” [Saint Basil the Great (A.D. 375), *The Holy Spirit* 27,66]

¹⁵ If they had been thinking of the land from which they had come, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶ But now they desire a better homeland, a heavenly one.

All the patriarchs acknowledged that their homeland was in heaven.

Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them. ¹⁷ By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises

Abraham’s faith is a classic case. His hopes for the fulfillment of God’s promise were bound up with the boy but Abraham, through faith, knew that God was instructing him to live out the divine plan.

was ready to offer his only son, ¹⁸ of whom it was said, “Through Isaac descendants shall bear your name.” ¹⁹ He reasoned that God was able to raise even from the dead, and he received Isaac back as a symbol.

The author sees Isaac’s deliverance from death as a symbol of the resurrection of Christ.

Gospel - Luke 12:32-48

Jesus, having told the disciples of the external problems they will encounter such as that of the Pharisees, whose leaven is hypocrisy, now tells them of internal problems caused by selfish Church officials.

[Jesus said to His disciples:] ³² “Do not be afraid any longer, little flock, for your Father is pleased to give you the kingdom.

To His struggling, opposed, and small group of disciples Jesus promises what is all-important: the kingdom; the powers of which are operative in their group.

³³ Sell your belongings and give alms. Provide money bags for yourselves that do not wear out, an inexhaustible treasure in heaven that no thief can reach nor moth destroy. ³⁴ For where your treasure is, there also will your heart be.

Don’t worry about material goods, share. Matthew 6:21 gives this in a negative form: “do not lay up treasures on earth.” Saint Luke’s account is more positive and demanding.

³⁵ “Gird your loins and light your lamps ³⁶ and be like servants

One who gives service to the Christian community.

who await their master's return from a wedding, ready to open immediately when he comes and knocks.

This role reversal is significant and underscores God's absolute gratuity. The servant who is faithful during the time of fulfillment before the parousia will share in the banquet in the end times.

³⁷ Blessed are those servants whom the master finds vigilant on his arrival. Amen, I say to you, he will gird himself, have them recline at table, and proceed to wait on them. ³⁸ And should he come in the second or third watch

The times for the changing of the watch were midnight and sunrise.

and find them prepared in this way, blessed are those servants. ³⁹ Be sure of this: if the master of the house had known the hour when the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁰ You also must be prepared, for at an hour you do not expect, the Son of Man will come." ⁴¹ Then Peter said,

Peter is the spokesman for the group. Notice that Jesus ignores the question, implying that it was out of place.

"Lord, is this parable meant for us or for everyone?" ⁴² And the Lord replied, "Who, then, is the faithful and prudent steward whom the master will put in charge of his servants to distribute (the) food allowance at the proper time?"

More seems to be involved than mere foodstuffs. Could this be a reference to communal meals such as the Eucharist?

⁴³ Blessed is that servant whom his master on arrival finds doing so. ⁴⁴ Truly, I say to you, he will put him in charge of all his property. ⁴⁵ But if that servant says to himself, 'My master is delayed in coming,' and begins to beat the menservants and the maidservants, to eat and drink and get drunk,

Echos of verse 19 sound: The Church official has taken on some of the characteristics of the fool.

⁴⁶ then that servant's master will come on an unexpected day and at an unknown hour and will punish him severely and assign him a place with the unfaithful. ⁴⁷ That servant who knew his master's will but did not make preparations nor act in accord with his will shall be beaten severely; ⁴⁸ and the servant who was ignorant of his master's will but acted in a way deserving of a severe beating shall be beaten only lightly. Much will be required of the person entrusted with much, and still more will be demanded of the person entrusted with more.

The punishments for unfaithful and negligent Church officials are stark. Community officials must be faithful and not create internal problems for the Church.

"Indeed, the more superior is a rational nature, so much the worse is its ruin; and the more unbelievable is its sin, so much more the damnable it is. The angel, therefore, fell irreparably,

because more is demanded of him to whom more is given . . . Adam, the first man, was of such an excellent nature, because that nature was not yet weakened, that his sin was much greater by far than are the sins of other men. Therefore his punishment too, which was the immediate consequence of his sin, seemed much more severe. It had been in Adam's power not to die; but now he was immediately bound by the necessity of dying, and he was immediately sent away from the place of such great happiness; and he was immediately barred from access to the tree of life. But when this was done, the human race was still in his loins. . . . Thus all the sons of Adam were infected through him with the contagion of sin and were subjected to the state of death." [Saint Augustine of Hippo (A.D. 428-430), *The Unfinished Work Against Julian's Second Reply*, 6,22]