

HEARERS OF THE WORD

Wisdom 9:13-18; Psalm 90 (89); Philemon 9-10, 12-17; Luke 14:25-33

Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple

Luke 14:25 Now large crowds were traveling with Jesus; and he turned and said to them, 26 “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. 27 Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.

28 For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? 29 Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, 30 saying, ‘This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.’

31 Or what king, going out to wage war against another king, will not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to oppose the one who comes against him with twenty thousand? 32 If he cannot, then, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for the terms of peace.

33 So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.

34 “*Salt is good; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? 35 It is fit neither for the soil nor for the manure pile; they throw it away. Let anyone with ears to hear listen!*”

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Three times Luke underlines the final journey to Jerusalem and this reading is found between the second and third mentions, that is, 13:22-17:10. The initial paragraph resembles Matthew 10:37-39, which is, however, much softer in expression. The two parabolic sayings resemble OT wisdom (see below) and are in some tension with the carefree attitude portrayed in 12:22-34.

The excerpt for today is best read in

www.tarsus.ie

light of all of chapter 14. The earlier verses (1-24) dealt with the Pharisees and their tragic “missing” the great end-time banquet of God. Verses 25-33 (34-35) deal the equally tragic destiny of would-be disciples, invited to the banquet but accepting without awareness of the cost of discipleship. There is a block in each case: in vv. 1-24 the block is material things and status; in vv. 25-35 the block is family and even attachment to life itself. In a word, superficial enthusiasm that cannot be sustained reveals the same gap between the ideal and the real that is found in Pharisaic tradition.

Thus, our reading is part of a longer discourse on discipleship running from v. 25 to v. 35 (restored above for convenience). Luke underlines regularly the cost of discipleship. Cf. Lk 9:57-62 and 18:24-30.

KIND OF WRITING

The warnings about the cost of discipleship may be found also in Matthew 10:37-38; 5:13; Mk 9:49-50. The two parables are really wisdom warnings before you undertake a project.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

The command to honour your parents is fundamental to the ethical vision of the Hebrew Bible and its apparent rejection something of a shock technique. It is the only one of the Ten Commandments with an explicit reward.

Honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. (Exodus 20:12)

Honour your father and your mother, as the Lord your God commanded you, so that your days may be long and that it may go well with you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. (Deuteronomy 5:16)

Thought for the day

A life without wonder would be very barren indeed. Babies are great at wonder and good communicators (in whatever field, such as nature or cosmology) have kept an almost childlike sense of discovery. Our faith, too, gets its energy from a combination of wonder, discovery and, betimes, perplexity. Some of the most inspiring passages in the Bible reflect this. For example, in Sirach 43, after an exhaustive review of the wonders of creation, the writer closes with the arresting words, *We could say more but could never say enough; let the final word be: “He is the all.”* (Sirach 43:27)

Prayer

God of all creation, we stand before your handiwork in awe and gratitude. God of salvation, nothing can ever separate us from your love. God of our inner life, sustain our surprise!

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

Then his mother and his brothers came to him, but they could not reach him because of the crowd. And he was told, “Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to see you.” But he said to them, “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.” (Luke 8:19-21)

Then he said to them all, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. (Luke 9:23)

To another he said, “Follow me.” But he said, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” But Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.” (Luke 9:59-60)

No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.” (Luke 16:13)

As they led him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from

the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus. (Luke 23:26–27; compare Mt 27:32 and Mk 15:21)

ST PAUL

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.” Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength. (1Corinthians 1:18–25)

For through the law I died to the law so that I may live to God. I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So the life I now live in the body, I live because of the faithfulness of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not set aside God’s grace, because if righteousness could come through the law, then Christ died for nothing! (Galatians 2:19–21 NET)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 25 This is part of the journey to Jerusalem motif found in three stages: 9:51-13:21; 13:22-17:10; 17:11-19:27. The “turning” of Jesus is used in Luke to express critical moments of contrasting attitudes: Luke 7:9, 44; 9:55; 10:23; 14:25; 22:61; 23:28. All the gospels mention the crowds which Jesus drew. Vv. 25-26 serve as introductions. The words are addressed, therefore, to *any would-be disciple*.

Verse 26 This is a saying taken from the Q source (or perhaps a variant oral tradition). Matthew’s “love more” is much less harsh. Luke, using the hyperbole of the prophet, emphasises that the primary loyalty of the Christian transcends even the fundamental loyalty, not to say love, towards family. Cf. 8:19-21 and 9:59-60. To hate in Hebrew also has the connotation of to leave aside. See

above Jesus’ response to his own mother and brothers. Cf. the comment of Peter: *Then Peter said, “Look, we have left our homes and followed you.”* (Luke 18:28) *On life, contrast: He said to his disciples, “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing.* (Luke 12:22–23) Cf. *Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.* (John 12:25) In Luke, the list of family members is extensive and pointed.

Verse 27 Cf. Luke 9:23-27; 14:27; 23:26. Follow is the fundamental invitation to discipleship. Cf. *When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him.* (Luke 5:11) *After this he went out and saw a tax collector named Levi, sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he got up, left everything, and followed him.* (Luke 5:27–28) There is a contrast with the “going after” false gods in the Hebrew Bible. What about “taking up the cross” as an expression? “Every criminal condemned to death bears his cross on his back” (Plutarch, Sera 554A–B). Everyone knew what crucifixion meant and anyone listening in the first century AD would have heard the saying fairly literally.

Verse 28 Two supplementary arguments follow. The tower in question could possibly a watchtower in a vineyard (cf. Mt 21:33 and Mk 12:1) although other scholars reject this (perhaps unnecessary) identification. Calculating is a feature of the prudential parables peculiar to Luke.

The Gospel of Thomas offers an intriguing parallel parable in saying 98.

Jesus said, “The Father’s kingdom is like a person who wanted to kill someone powerful. While still at home he drew his sword and thrust it into the wall to find out whether his hand would go in. Then he killed the powerful one.” *GThom* 98

Verse 29 The argument is from shame, the risk of appearing foolish.

Verse 30 Implied, then, is a warning not to undertake discipleship in a superficial frame of mind.

Verse 31 Possibly because of the military connotations of a watchtower, Luke adds a parable on a much larger scale about a king going to war. Accordingly, the emotional impact undergoes an escalation. The clear imbalance of forces obliges the one going to war to calculate and, very sensibly, even to seek terms.

Verse 32 The image of surrendering continues the motif of failure from the previous parable. The parallel with the first parable breaks down in v. 32 when terms are sought. In any case, the message is clear: Do not undertake discipleship lightly.

Verse 33 With all the calculations expressed in these two parables, the conclusion is piquant: unless you calculate that you must put aside calculation, don’t count on being a disciple! The one resource necessary is the capacity to give up resources. Jesus sets down in the plainest language the condition of unswerving loyalty. Possessions constitute a large theme (and threat) in Luke-Acts: 12:33; 18:22 and Acts 5:1-11.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The passage is a call to both radical and practical discipleship. When have you found that in order to achieve a certain objective you had to make it a priority, and then take the practical steps necessary to reach your goal? What were the benefits to you when you did this?

2. “Hate” is prophetic exaggeration for the uncompromising loyalty Jesus seeks in disciples. There may be times when people make demands in conflict with fidelity to another relationship. This can be painful. When have you found that being clear about your priorities helped you in that situation?

3. Jesus uses parables here to tell us that in important human affairs we do not settle for vague aspirations. When have you found that some element of practical planning has been necessary to make progress with a project? What has this taught you about making the most of your life and of your time?

PRAYER

God of the ages, you call the Church to keep watch in the world and to discern the signs of the times.

Grant us the wisdom which your Spirit bestows, that with courage we may proclaim your prophetic word and complete the work that you have set before us.

We make our prayer through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love—I, Paul, an old man

Philemon 8 *So, although I have quite a lot of confidence in Christ and could command you to do what is proper,* 9 I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love—I, Paul, an old man and even now a prisoner for the sake of Christ Jesus— 10 I am appealing to you concerning my child, whose spiritual father I have become during my imprisonment, that is, Onesimus, 11 *who was formerly useless to you, but is now useful to you and me.* 12 I have sent him (who is my very heart) back to you. 13 I wanted to keep him so that he could serve me in your place during my imprisonment for the sake of the gospel. 14 However, without your consent I did not want to do anything, so that your good deed would not be out of compulsion, but from your own willingness. 15 For perhaps it was for this reason that he was separated from you for a little while, so that you would have him back eternally, 16 no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, as a dear brother. He is especially so to me, and even more so to you now, both humanly speaking and in the Lord. 17 Therefore if you regard me as a partner, accept him as you would me.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Philemon is a short, passionate and attractive letter. We overhear Paul in a different key—not the great theologian but the caring pastor and friend. Verses not in the lectionary excerpt are in italics.

KIND OF WRITING

Philemon resembles a typical Hellenistic letter, bring brief and personal. At the same time, it breathes a powerful air of compact persuasion or rhetoric.

Vv.	LETTER	SPEECH
1-3	Superscript	—
4-7	Thanksgiving	<i>Introduction</i>
8-22	Letter Body	<i>Proof 1: 8-16</i> <i>Proof 2: 17-22</i>
23-25	Postscript	—

As outlined above, our reading gives us the substance of proof 1 (8-16) and the initial sentence of proof 2 (17-22).

ORIGIN OF THE READING

There have been many attempts to re-
www.tarsus.ie

construct the context of this letter. Perhaps the most plausible reconstruction is also the least dramatic. It was not unknown for a slave to run away, not to escape permanently, but find a friend of his/her owner so as to negotiate better conditions. This would explain why a slave “ran away” to a prominent friend of the owner. It would also account for the tone and content of the letter. In the course of his time with Paul, Onesimus fell under the influence of the apostle and became a Christ-believer. In the letter, Paul does not hesitate to use this fact to encourage Philemon to be extra generous not only because of Paul but because Onesimus is now a brother in the Lord.

What was Paul’s attitude to slavery? Slavery in those days exhibited a range of conditions, from unfortunate chained miners to highly educated tutors. It must frankly be said that Paul does not take on or criticise the institution of slavery at the time. Because Onesimus is also a Christian the old relationship to his owner no longer applicable.

RELATED PASSAGES

From Paul, a *slave* of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God. (Romans 1:1 NET)

But as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, and in all eagerness and in the love from us that is in you—make sure that you excel in this act of kindness too. I am not saying this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love by comparison with the eagerness of others. (2 Corinthians 8:7–8 NET)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 8 Paul intimates that he could have taken a different tack, that of his apostolic authority. “Confidence translates *parrēsia*, the notable Christian virtue of boldness, daring, audacity.

Verse 9 Appeal is typical of private correspondence. Paul augments the appeal to love by describing his present, presumably weaker position.

Verse 10 Obliquely, Paul informs Philemon that Onesimus has become a Christ believer. “My child” is typically of this converted by Paul himself (1 Cor.

4:14, 17; Gal. 4:19; cf. Phil. 2:22; 1 Thes. 2:11). Note the imprisonment again.

Verse 11 Onesimus means “useful”, leading to the play of words in v. 11, using a different vocabulary. A slave called “useful” must have been heartily sick of such a sobriquet.

Verse 12 This is the most emotional moment in the letter. “Heart” is an accurate translation of *splanchna*, lit. inwards, meaning the centre of emotion, feeling and love. In the Gospels it is usually translated as “compassion.”

Verse 13 All three protagonists are present in this verse. The decision to send him back was a hard one. It is not likely that Onesimus could have served Paul on behalf of Philemon without the latter’s explicit permission.

Verse 14 Asserting freedom is a subtle way of adding pressure, of course. Cf. 2 Cor 8:8-9 above; also 2 Cor 9:7.

Verses 15-16a Paul’s version of “God works in mysterious ways.” “Eternally” is marvellously ambiguous: permanently or for eternity? The persuasion is indeed delicate and sensitive. The minimum being requested is a transformed relationship, perhaps even freedom (manumission).

Verse 16b Two discourses are joined here: the very human and the highly spiritual. Through Paul, Onesimus should be even dearer to Philemon. “More so to me” is a cliché of Hellenistic letter writing.

Verse 17 Partner translates the powerful *koinōnos*, linked to *koinōnia*, fellowship. Philemon, as an evangelist in the Pauline churches, would welcome Paul with open arms and open heart. No doubt, Onesimus himself handed this letter to Philemon—another expressive image.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Paul is mending fractured relationships. Have you been involved in such “negotiations”?

2. Paul’s attachment to Onesimus is matched by pastoral detachment—a tricky balance to get right at any time.

PRAYER

God, in your eyes, we are all equal and there are no distinctions. Help us to see everyone from your perspective. Amen.

We can hardly guess at what is on earth but who has traced out what is in the heavens?

Wis 9:13 “For who can learn the counsel of God?
Or who can discern what the Lord wills?
14 For the reasoning of mortals is worthless,
and our designs are likely to fail;
15 for a perishable body weighs down the soul,
and this earthy tent burdens the thoughtful mind.
16 We can hardly guess at what is on earth,
and what is at hand we find with labour;
but who has traced out what is in the heavens?
17 Who has learned your counsel,
unless you have given wisdom
and sent your holy spirit from on high?
18 And thus the paths of those on earth were set right,
and people were taught what pleases you,
and were saved by wisdom.”



INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The choice of this reading reflects the Christian conviction that the cross is a paradox which challenges our reason. This is found plainly in St Paul: *For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”* (1 Cor 1:18–19)

KIND OF WRITING

Wisdom 9 is Solomon’s prayer for Wisdom. After all the preparation and praise (especially in ch. 8), it is a really important moment. Although written in Greek, it reflects the usual biblical parallelism in style.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

The book of Wisdom is an extraordinary achievement. It was written around the end of the first century bc or the early in the first century ad. It is an attempt to prevent young members of the large Jewish community in Alexandria being attracted to surrounding religions and philosophies. Nevertheless, it is itself a very rich expression of Hellenistic culture, albeit at the service of the Jewish faith. Fundamentally, it tells them that the wisdom they seek elsewhere is to be found truly and even more wonderfully in their own tradition.

The book shows the following shape:

- 1-6 – a reflection on Wisdom which contrasts good and bad people.
- 7-9 – Solomon’s prayer for and praise of Wisdom.

10-19 – A review of OT from Adam to Moses, attributing the great events of Moses.

The central section is a portrait of Solomon seeking wisdom. It offers a life-direction to anyone seeking to be “ruler” in his/her own life.

RELATED PASSAGES

“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its measurements—surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy? (Job 38:4–7; cf. Baruch 3:29-37)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 13 This open question is the premiss of the Wisdom literature. There is a marvellous example of it in Job 28 (well worth pondering).

Verse 14 This would surprise someone of Greek education, which trusted wisdom.

Verse 15 This verse will sound “Platonic” to us, with its split between body and soul and the implied denigration of matter. Although against Greek religion, the writer is influenced by Greek philosophy. Philo Alexandria, a near contemporary, reflects the same cultural background.

Verse 16 This is an a fortiori argument. A similar sentiment lies behind Job 38-41, on a much grander scale (see excerpt above). Even so, the sentiment is

characteristic of the Wisdom books.

Verse 17 This is not quite a rhetorical question, because an answer is given: human can come to a deeper understanding but only if God supplies his wisdom / spirit. The shift from wisdom to spirit is already established in the previous chapter, in these striking phrases: For wisdom is more mobile than any motion; because of her pureness she pervades and penetrates all things. For she is a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty; therefore nothing defiled gains entrance into her. For she is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness. Although she is but one, she can do all things, and while remaining in herself, she renews all things; in every generation she passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God, and prophets; for God loves nothing so much as the person who lives with wisdom. (Wis 7:24–28)

Verse 18 This is really a bridge verse, which leads into the final section of the book of Wisdom. A great review of OT history is undertaken, showing that the mighty heroes of old achieved all they did on account of the gift of Wisdom. In this way, the young of Alexandria, already familiar with the ancestral tales, will be drawn to emulate the heroes and seek godly Wisdom.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Did it ever happen to you that you thought you had grasped some situation or idea only to realise you just didn’t get it at all?
2. A sense of awe and wonder before the mystery God is surely part of any authentic faith. Can you name the people or places or events in your life which make you aware of the “beyond” of God?

PRAYER

Creator God, in you we live and move and have our being. Draw us closer to the mystery of your presence and action in our world. Amen.

THE LITURGY

Wisdom 9:13-18; Psalm 90 (89); Philemon 9-10, 12-17; Luke 14:25-33

READINGS 1 AND 3

The sense of puzzlement is surely a preparation for the great paradox of the cross and cruciform discipleship. Only by a gift can we approach the mystery.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 90 (89) makes a good response to the reading. It reminds the person praying of fragility of life and goes on to pray for God's favour.

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Wisdom 9:13-18

We love to figure things out and we do figure out lots. But the big questions are still there. With them comes a question: how will we ever come to a good and deep understanding.

Second reading

Philemon 9-10, 12-17

Philemon is the shortest (there are no chapters!) of the genuine Pauline letters. Nevertheless, the text is intensely warm and personal. The context is a runaway slave who came to Paul. The details are really not known, but the convention of slavery is undermined in practice if not in principle.

Gospel

Luke 14:25-33

Early Christians were sharply aware that being a Christian comes at a price. This gospel story warns us to be aware of what we are undertaking—a warning which is nearly always timely.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 5 September

1 Corinthians 5:1-8

Paul can be shocked by the behaviour of the Corinthians and in this reading he really is taken aback. Of course, he doesn't hold back either! Paul is motivated by the vision of our new life in Christ, our passover.

Luke 6:6-11

Jesus scandalised his contemporaries

because he was so free—free enough in this story to put the well-being of a human being above a rigorous tradition. We can all think of similar situation in our contemporary church, of course!

Tuesday 6 September

1 Corinthians 6:1-11

Conflict is normal in communities of faith and was frequent in Corinth. Nevertheless, Paul is shocked that they take each other to court to resolve issues. It should be possible to overcome such difficulties within the community but this is not always the case.

Luke 6:12-19

The familiar “Sermon on the Mount” is in Luke's hand the Sermon on the Plain. Our verses today introduce the Sermon with the appointment of the apostles. The number twelve reminds us of the twelve tribes of Israel and the appointment of the twelve was a symbolic action pointing to the restoration of Israel.

Wednesday 7 September

1 Corinthians 7:25-31

In St Paul's mind, the witness of celibacy is appropriate to the nature of the times and can be practical. In any, case, he is not against getting married and may well have been married himself at an earlier stage of his life.

Luke 6:20-26

Instead of the eight or nine Beatitudes familiar from Matthew, Luke offers four Beatitudes with four corresponding Woes. Because of the plain unspiritualised meaning, it is likely that the first three in each set closely resemble what Jesus said. Jesus really meant poor and hungry and weeping in a quite literal sense, which can still shock.

Thursday 8 September

Birthday of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Micah 5:1-4

The prophecy of Micah is cited in the story of the Magi in Matthew's Gospel. It brings us to Bethlehem and to the birth of Jesus, whose mother's birth we mark today.

Matthew 1:1:1-16, 18-23

The long version of the Gospel includes the remarkable genealogy from Matthew. All of us have something in our background, some kind of shadow, and as we hear clearly in the genealogy, so did Jesus our Messiah. Precisely because he is like us he can help us.

Friday 9 September

St Ciaran, abbot of Clonmacnoise

1 Corinthians 9:16-19, 22-27

St Paul reflects on his own ministry. He does try to answer one question: why did he take no money for himself? Not taking money did get him into trouble because the communities felt indebted to him and wanted to express their gratitude. Refusing such help, in a way, shamed them and they felt it. At the end he uses metaphors from athletics, running and boxing.

Luke 6:39-42

A very energetic series of images all point to the same teaching. Having been a carpenter, Jesus knew all about splinters and planks. There is a possibility that this earnest teaching was offered with a smile on the lips!

Saturday 10 September

St Peter Claver, religious and priest

1 Corinthians 10:14-22

St Paul goes back to the question of food sacrificed to idols. This permits a rich reflection on what it means to be a communicant member of the body of Christ. At this point, he counsels abstaining from the remains of pagan sacrifices, even though that was the poor person's most regular way of eating meat. Paul knows that idols do not exist but eating the left-overs from the sacrifices could easily be misunderstood.

Luke 6:43-49

Our uncompromising Gospel today puts before us two sets of images. The first set comes from gardening. The second set of images is taken from building—a less common “hobby” today, but we know what is meant. Being the images lies the phenomenon of wadis, dry river beds, subject to flash floods. Building on a dry river bed is plainly very short-sighted!