

HEARERS OF THE WORD

Wisdom 7:7-11; Psalm 90 (89); Hebrews 4:12-13; Mark 10:17-30

Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; come, follow me

Mk 10:17 As Jesus was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” 18 Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. 19 You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honour your father and mother.’” 20 He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” 21 Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” 22 When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

23 Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” 24 And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 25 It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” 26 They were greatly astounded and said to one another, “Then who can be saved?” 27 Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”

28 Peter began to say to him, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.” 29 Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, 30 who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life.”

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The three scenes here are joined by the themes of wealth and poverty. The opening story of the rich man is itself a threefold warning. At a first level, it is a warning against the hindrance of riches. At the same time, this “failed vocation story” is the only example of a potential disciple who comes on his own initiative and not at Jesus’ behest. Thirdly, it shows Jesus putting his finger unerringly on the gap between aspiration and reality in this person’s life. This penetrating discernment helps the man see that he is not really as “gospel greedy” as his words profess. The subsequent scenes then take up the issue of wealth in general (the rich) and in particular (the disciples).

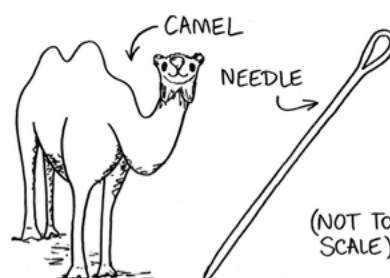
KIND OF WRITING

The three connected scenes start with a *chreia*, an anecdote with gestures and words. The second and third scenes pursue the theme of discipleship from two opposing perspectives: the perspective of hindrance and the perspective of freedom. There is also a frame: eternal life in v. 17 and v. 30.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

The Ten Commandments lie in part behind this text (see Exodus 20:1-17; Deuteronomy 5:6-21).

On the topic of wealth, the Old Testa-



Thought for the day

We all have our own “emotional programmes for happiness.” These are part of who we are from a very young age, structured around what was happening then in our lives. To continue in these attitudes well beyond the need for them is the common human experience. At the same time, the call to be fully alive entails some kind of conversion, some kind of letting go. Commonly, something triggers this growth and we become aware of hitherto unrecognised blocks. We may even have the help of someone like Jesus to put his/her finger on the hidden hesitations.

Prayer

God of freedom, you desire nothing more than our strongest love, coming freely from within. *For freedom Christ has set us free.* Help to recognise how much we are still bound and blind.

ment shows ambivalence. On the one hand, wealth and wellbeing are signs of God’s blessing and a reward for fidelity (Ps 24:1; Isa. 45:14; 60:5, etc.). On the other hand, wealth leads to greed, treachery and oppression (2 Sam. 12:1-14; Isa. 10:3; Jer. 5:27; 17:3; Ezek. 7:11; Hos. 12:8; Mic. 6:12). There is a gradual crescendo of critique against wealth in the Hebrew Bible, mainly on the grounds that the *few* wealthy have become rich at the expense of the *many* poor.

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

Across the New Testament, there is strong critique of wealth. The real problem here is putting possessions rather than God at the centre of your life.

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matt 6:21)

“No one 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. (Matt 6:24)

“But woe to you who are rich, for you

have received your consolation. (Luke 6:24)

But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains. (1 Tim 6:9–10)

Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you. Your riches have rotted, and your clothes are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you, and it will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure for the last days. Listen! The wages of the labourers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the righteous one, who does not resist you. (Jas 5:1–6)

Now large crowds were travelling with him; and he turned and said to them, “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. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. . . . So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions.” (Luke 14:25–33)

ST PAUL

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. (Phil 3:7–11)

For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. (2 Corinthians 8:9)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 17 The journey is the way to Jerusalem, the way of discipleship. “Teacher” is a regular and respectful address in Mark (Mark 4:38; 5:35; 9:17, 38; 10:17, 20, 35; 12:14, 19, 32; 13:1; 14:14).

Verse 18 This unsettling response would never have been composed by early Christians and is, therefore, very likely to be historical.

Verse 19 A selection of the commandments.

Verse 20 The claim is not proud but may show a disarming keenness and even an endearing naivety.

Verse 21 The love of Jesus sees the potential *and* the blockage. This discernment is penetrating and hits the man very hard.

Verse 22 Finally, he realises that the demands of discipleship are too much for him and he goes away sad but goes away nonetheless.

Verse 23 The transition to the general discussion is both smooth and challenging.

Verse 24 They are perplexed because abundance was also a sign of blessing from God. The difficulty of entering the kingdom is made even more general, because the word “wealthy” is now omitted.

Verse 25 The metaphor raises the critique from difficulty to practical impossibility. The metaphor stands as a grotesque exaggeration—we may imagine it being said with a smile.

(In the past, there was a baseless hypothesis that one of the gates of Jerusalem was very narrow and camels could squeeze through by kneeling and off-loading their “baggage”! There is no evidence in archaeology for this moralising interpretation.)

Verse 26 This triggers a natural response from the disciples.

Verse 27 The teaching here is deep with implied meaning: *if* we allow God to work on us. The man in the story was put into a critical position of choosing and he chose not to attend to Jesus’ discernment of his heart. There is, indeed, a choice to be made.

Verse 28 This is the opposite case, so to speak, but no less penetrating.

Verse 29 The description takes in all kinds of backgrounds to discipleship. The list may reflect more widely early Christianity and the division of family created (see Luke 14:25–33). The key is “for my sake and for the sake of the good news”

Verse 30 A double shock: “now in this age” and “with persecutions”. Early Christianity was not as family-friendly as some of our contemporaries like to imagine. It furnished instead an alternative family (“fictive kinship”), with the typical language of brother and sister for insiders. It remains true to this day that within the family of the faith it is possible to speak of things close to our hearts in ways impossible with our blood family.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. We often get satisfaction from the things we own, clothes, cars, homes, gadgets, or money. There would be something unnatural if we did not. But what happens to us when our possessions begin to ‘own’ us, when they take a hold of us, when we become obsessed with them? Jesus seeks followers who have the freedom to let go of possessions in order to be a servant of others. In whom have you seen this freedom? When have you experienced it yourself?

2. Growth implies change. That change sometimes means letting go of something we have at this moment: job, status, home, security, or something else we value. There can be an apparent loss in letting go but when have you found that you gained by having the freedom to let go of something you had previously clung to?

3. The disciples thought that Jesus was making impossible demands of people following him. He acknowledged that discipleship was impossible to us on our own efforts alone. How have you experienced the benefits of the help of others and of God when you were faced with difficulties in life?

PRAYER

God of wisdom, whose word probes the motives of our hearts, with you all things are possible. Let worldly treasure not keep us from Jesus who looks on us with love.

Free us to leave all things and follow him, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, for ever and ever. Amen.

The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword

Heb. 4:12 Indeed, the word (*logos*) of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. 13 And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account (*logos*).

Heb 4:14 *Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession.*

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Today we have one of the passages most often remembered from Hebrews. It concludes one of hortatory passages in the “letter” (see below).

KIND OF WRITING

There is no one structure to Hebrews agreed by all.

The passage we are reading is the *peroration*, drawing to a conclusion a longer reflection / exhortation on faithfulness. The conclusion functions as a final appeal and even as a threat to galvanise the listeners into action.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

A mirror reading of the exhortation reveals the writer’s perception of the challenges faced by the community: an evil, unbelieving heart (3:12); take care not to faith to reach God’s promised rest (4:1); disobedience (4:11); to God we must all render an account (4:13). The writer is reflecting chiefly on the faithfulness of Jesus, which is both an inspiration to us and a contrast to our own.

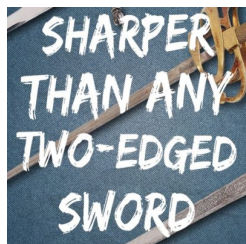
RELATED PASSAGES

God spoke

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. (Hebrews 1:1–2)

Validity of God’s Word

For if the message declared through angels was valid, and every transgression or disobedience received a just penalty, how can we escape if we neglect so great



a salvation? It was declared at first through the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard him, while God added his testimony by signs and wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit, distributed according to his will. (Hebrews 2:2–4)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 12 Vv. 12-13 are a single unit framed by the use of the word *logos*, used in two different senses (as noted above in the text). The emphasis fits with the preceding exhortation, which placed so much emphasis on *hearing his voice*.

Behind the descriptions of God’s word stands a tradition which reflected on God’ Word, God’s Wisdom and God’s Torah. E.g. *For wisdom is more mobile than any motion; because of her pureness she pervades and penetrates all things.* (Wisdom 7:24) *For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.* (Isaiah 55:10–11)

God’s word as a sword: *He made my mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me a polished arrow,*

in his quiver he hid me away. (Isaiah 49:2)

The pairs mentioned are not opposites but synonyms. The word can penetrate and divide the apparently impenetrable and indivisible. For the intentions of the heart, *The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse— who can understand it?* (Jer 17:9)

Verse 13 The same thought is found in Psalm 139: *O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.* (Psalms 139:1–3). Cf. *And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.* (Romans 8:27)

Verse 14 Although not in the appointed reading, this verse concludes the exhortation, promoting steadfastness in our confession.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. What does the word of God mean to me? How did I come to discover its power in my own life?
2. Discerning of the heart is a tricky business and we often delude ourselves. What the role of God’s word in my own discernment of heart?

PRAYER

Merciful God, anoint me with your Holy Spirit. And as I read your word, let me hear your voice speaking to me from within.

Give me wisdom to understand your message to me. Let your word be the joy of my heart and a lamp for my steps.

Give me strength to build my life on your word. May I rejoice in the blessedness of hearing your word and keeping it. Speak Lord, your servant is listening...

A.	1-4: <i>Introduction</i>
I.	1:5-2:18 a name greater than the angels
II.	A. 3:1-4:14 Jesus the faithful one
	B. 4:15-5:10. Jesus, merciful high priest
III.	—5:11-6:20 Preliminary exhortation
	A. 7:1-28 Priest according to the order of Melchizedech
	B. 8:1-9:28 Accomplishment of his priesthood
	C. 10:1-18 Cause of eternal salvation
	—10:19-29 Final exhortation
IV.	A. 11:1-40 The faith of our ancestors
	B. 12:1-13 The necessary steadfastness
V.	12:14-13:18 Right paths towards the fruit of righteousness
X.	13:20-21 <i>Conclusion</i>
	13:(19), 22-25 Words of farewell

Therefore I prayed, and understanding was given me

Wis. 7:7 Therefore I prayed, and understanding was given me; I called on God, and the spirit of wisdom came to me. 8 I preferred her to sceptres and thrones, and I accounted wealth as nothing in comparison with her. 9 Neither did I liken to her any priceless gem, because all gold is but a little sand in her sight, and silver will be accounted as clay before her. 10 I loved her more than health and beauty, and I chose to have her rather than light, because her radiance never ceases. 11 All good things came to me along with her, and in her hands uncounted wealth.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Our passage is a description of prayer rather than a prayer as such, which comes later in chapter 9.

KIND OF WRITING

The Wisdom of Solomon represents a high cultural achievement, using many of the techniques of literary art and rhetoric from the period. Thus, this section is laid out in a concentric pattern. There are two advantages in knowing this. Firstly, the central section is often the heart of the text. This is certainly true here, because 7:22b-8:1 forms the climax of this middle part, and indeed of the book as a whole. Secondly, the “wings” are meant to be read together.

- (a) Solomon like other humans (7:1-6)
- (b) Solomon prayed and got Wisdom and riches (7:7-12)
- (c) Solomon prays for eloquence about Wisdom. (7:13-22a)
- (d) *The Nature of Wisdom* (7:22b-8:1)
- (c*) Solomon sought Wisdom, source of knowledge (8:2-8)
- (b*) Solomon sought Wisdom. as counsellor and comfort (8:9-16)
- (a*) Solomon realises Wisdom is a gift from God (8:17-21)

Our section is taken from (b), omitting the last verse.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

The Wisdom of Solomon seems to have been written around the turn of the era, that is, c. 30 bc. It was written by a highly educated, articulate Jew who was much influenced by Greek culture and philosophy. The book is a sophisticated attempt to draw young Jewish men away

from the attractions of Greco-Roman culture and to reassure them that what they were seeking there was to be found right here in their own tradition, rightly understood. In a word, the writer is doing what we all have to do: to negotiate a tradition into a new cultural context.

The Wisdom of Solomon may be presented in three parts, as follows:

- 1-6: an invitation to Wisdom contrasting both good and bad.
- 7-9: Solomon’s prayer for and praise of Wisdom.
- 10-19: A review of the Old Testament from Adam to Moses

RELATED PASSAGES

The desire for Wisdom is found widely in the Book of Wisdom itself and in the other Wisdom books of the Bible. A few examples may serve to illustrate.

Love righteousness, you rulers of the earth, think of the Lord in goodness and seek him with sincerity of heart; because he is found by those who do not put him to the test, and manifests himself to those who do not distrust him. (Wis 1:1–2)

With you is wisdom, she who knows your works and was present when you made the world; she understands what is pleasing in your sight and what is right according to your commandments. Send her forth from the holy heavens, and from the throne of your glory send her, that she may labor at my side, and that I may learn what is pleasing to you. For she knows and understands all things, and she will guide me wisely in my actions and guard me with her glory. Then my works will be acceptable, and I shall judge your people justly, and shall be worthy of the throne of my father. (Wis 9:9–12)

The challenge of the quest for Wisdom is not underestimated in Job.

“Where then does wisdom come from? And where is the place of understanding? It is hidden from the eyes of all living, and concealed from the birds of the air. Abaddon and Death say, ‘We have heard a rumour of it with our ears.’ (Job 28:20–22)

And now, my children, listen to me: happy are those who keep my ways.

Hear instruction and be wise, and do not neglect it. Happy is the one who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting beside my doors. For whoever finds me finds life and obtains favour from the Lord; but those who miss me injure themselves; all who hate me love death. (Prov 8:32–36)

The basis for Solomon’s wisdom is found in the first book of the Kings 3:5-14.

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 7 Wisdom is a gift, a divine gift of God’s Spirit within. Notice the perfect balance of the phrases.

Verse 8 The Wisdom of Solomon is a late book and so the picture of Solomon is quite idealised. Here, he prefers wisdom to all the glory of a monarch.

Verse 9 Cf. the reading from Job 28, which compares the search for wisdom with the effort that goes into finding precious stones and metals.

Verse 10 Hyperbole of a high order! Health, beauty and light are desiderata in all cultures.

Verse 11 This is the mystery of Solomon: he prized Wisdom above other human goods and yet the human goods came to him as well in any case. Cf. Job 28:15-19; Prov 2:4; 3:13-16.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. For all its idealism, the passage does remind us that true wisdom from on high is a gift, for which we need to pray.

2. My own priorities become clear when I reflect on how I spend my time and on what I expend my energies. How do I measure up in comparison to Solomon’s pure desire for the Wisdom of God’s Spirit?

PRAYER

You, O God, created us all to live forever, and made us in the image of your own eternity. Yet even one who is perfect among human beings will be regarded as nothing without the wisdom that comes from you: for it is an unfailling treasure for mortals – those who get it obtain friendship with you, O God, commended for the gifts that come from instruction.

In every generation Wisdom passes into holy souls and makes them your friends and prophets; for you love nothing so much as the person who lives with wisdom. Amen!

THE LITURGY

Wisdom 7:7-11; Psalm 90 (89); Hebrews 4:12-13; Mark 10:17-30

READINGS 1 AND 3

The Gospel reading illustrates priorities and the young man who comes to Jesus has chosen the priority of wealth and position. The contrast with Solomon, who preferred wisdom over money etc., gives a positive preparation for the Gospel.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

The psalm is chosen for the first words which do fit very well: *Make us know the shortness of our life that we may gain wisdom of heart.*

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First Reading

Wisdom 7:7-11

Wisdom is something we admire in others and would love to have for ourselves. In this reading, Solomon says that wisdom is more important to him than possessions or power or even health.

Second Reading

Hebrews 4:12-13

If you were to use an image for the word of God, what would you say? God's word, like a two-edged sword, cuts through to the heart of the matter.

Gospel

Mark 10:17-30

Possessions—and we all need them—can present a challenge to living as disciples of Christ. To what do I give priority? It is not an easy question.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 14 October

St Callistus, bishop of Rome and martyr

Galatians 4:22-24, 26-27, 31-5:1

The argument here is dense. The main idea is that Christians are the spiritual descendants of the free-born wife (Sarah). Because she is free, her descendants too should be free from the Jewish Law. Hence the wonderful last line of the reading.

Luke 11:29-32

In true prophetic mode, Jesus takes on

those who have *not* believed in him. He evokes great figures from the past, Jonah and Solomon. The word of condemnation are meant, not in the tone of grim retribution, but rather as yet another call not to miss “the day of salvation.”

Tuesday 15 October

St Teresa of Ávila, virgin and doctor

Galatians 5:1-6

Paul teaches that Christ has set us free from the burden of the Law; there is no going back. On the contrary, “what matters is faith that makes its power felt through love.”

Luke 11:37-41

Because we are followers of Jesus, we tend to side with him emotionally in the controversies of his ministry. But it is vital not to leave such stories in the past. Religious hypocrisy, like the poor, is with us always. The harsh words of Jesus are directed to us today.

Wednesday 16 October

St Hedwig, religious; St Margaret Mary Alacoque, virgin; St Gall, abbot and missionary

Galatians 5:18-25

Two ways of living are contrasted here, in graphic terms. No one is completely one or the other; nevertheless, the direction we should take is clear: “Since the Spirit is our life, let us be directed by the Spirit.”

Luke 11:42-46

There is a risk in all traditions that we focus on the marginal and miss the heart of the matter. This certainly seems to have happened with *some* Pharisees in Jesus' day. It is likewise not unknown in church practice, alas!

Thursday 17 October

St Ignatius of Antioch, bishop and martyr

Because of features in the vocabulary and teaching and because of an evident dependance of Colossians, Ephesians is be appreciated as a Deutero-Pauline letter.

Ephesians 1:1-10

If we were to name all the gifts we have in Christ, how would we begin? In this prayer from Ephesians, the writer blesses God again and again for all he done for

us in Christ.

Luke 11:47-54

In Luke's Gospel, the primary “category” for Jesus is that of prophet—something very apparent from today's Gospel. He himself learned from the destiny of the prophets, finally coming to appreciate that his ministry too would come to a tragic end. We can see something of the way in this furious scene.

Friday 18 October

St Luke, evangelist

2 Timothy 4:10-17

The reading is chosen for the feast because it mentions a certain “Luke.” This is unlike to be the same as the writer of the Gospel and Acts. However, the reading shows wavering support for the apostle or, in reality, for those sustaining the Pauline tradition in a later context.

Luke 10:1-9

The sending the seventy-two—unique to Luke and anticipating the wider mission in the Acts—portrays a picture of fleet-footed evangelisers, who travel lightly and without hindrance of any kind.

Saturday 19 October

Sts John de Brébeuf and Isaac Jogues, priests, and their companions, martyrs; St Paul of the Cross, priest and religious

Ephesians 1:15-23

Our reading today is a glorious, richly inspired prayer, which we can take away with us and reflect on later in the day. Our only response must be “amen, amen.”

Luke 12:8-12

The first saying is blunt challenge not to disown Christ. The third saying is a reassurance that the Holy Spirit will help us when we are threatened for our belief. Most mysterious of all is the “sin against the Holy Spirit” which, against all we believe about God, apparently cannot be forgiven. What can this mean? It does not mean any particular sin but rather the closing of the heart, in a fundamental way, to God's grace in Jesus. That too, of course, can be forgiven—but only on condition that the closed heart has been opened.