

HEARERS OF THE WORD



Wisdom 18:6-9; Psalm 33 (32); Hebrew 11:1-2, 8-19; Luke 12:32-48

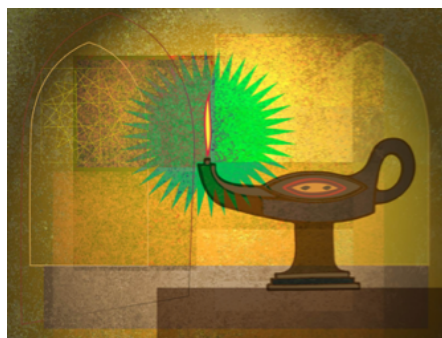
Make for yourselves an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys

Luke 12:32 [Jesus said] “Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom. 33 Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. 34 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

35 “Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; 36 be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. 37 Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them. 38 If he comes during the middle of the night, or near dawn, and finds them so, blessed are those slaves.

39 “But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. 40 You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”

41 Peter said, “Lord, are you telling this parable for us or for everyone?” 42 And the Lord said, “Who then is the faithful and prudent manager whom his master will put in charge of his slaves, to give them their allowance of food at the proper time? 43 Blessed is that slave whom his master will find at work when he arrives. 44 Truly I tell you, he will put that one in charge of all his possessions. 45 But if that slave says to himself, ‘My master is delayed in coming,’ and if he begins to beat the other slaves, men and women, and to eat and drink and get drunk, 46 the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour that he does not know, and will cut him in pieces, and put him with the unfaithful. 47 That slave who knew what his master



wanted, but did not prepare himself or do what was wanted, will receive a severe beating. 48 But the one who did not know and did what deserved a beating will receive a light beating. From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

This passage is a continuation of Luke’s reflections on possessions and discipleship, already noted on the previous Sunday as an important theme for this Gospel. It is really in four parts: ABA¹C

A. vv. 32-34: counsel on possessions, with the image of a thief, in a wisdom key.

B. vv. 35-38: the household imagery is supplemented by nuptial imagery.

A¹. vv. 39-40: the thief imagery returns in an explicitly apocalyptic key.

C. vv. 41-48: the imagery of keeping watch is developed with a question.

Luke has rearranged a selection of traditional material (Q = Sayings Source), intermingling his own sources (L).

V. 32	= Luke only (L)
Vv. 33-34	= Mt 6:19-21 (Q)
Vv. 35-38	= Mt 24:45-51 (Q)
Vv. 39-40	= Mt 24:43-44 (Q)
V. 41	= Luke only (L)

Thought for the day

It is alarming to think that “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” To find out where my treasure is I need to look not at what I *think* but at what I *do*. How do I choose to spend my time? Where does my best concentration go? What “things” in life provide me with the greatest challenge and the greatest fulfilment? When am I most truly myself?

Even more, to know myself spiritually, introspection is only a limited guide. What I really need to do is to take account of how I act. What about the last week, for example? What does that tell me about myself?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, let me know myself and know you, and desire nothing, save only you. Look upon me, that I may love you. Call me, that I may see you, and for ever enjoy you. Amen.

St Augustine

Vv. 42-46 = Mt 24:45-51 (Q)

KIND OF WRITING

This text is a series of teachings on possessions, combining wisdom and apocalyptic dimensions.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. (Isaiah 55:1-2)

The lover of money will not be satisfied with money; nor the lover of wealth, with gain. This also is vanity. (Ecclesiastes 5:9-10)

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of

any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. (Acts 4:32–33). *The ideal was not always observed!*

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. (Philippians 3:7–11)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 32 The context for this saying is captured in Acts: *Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God that he obtained with the blood of his own Son. I know that after I have gone, savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.* (Acts 20:28–29) Good pleasure = “well pleased” in another context: *And the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”* (Luke 3:22)

Verse 33 Alms-giving is typical of Luke-Acts (2-0-2+8). The image of the thief is established here. It has an interesting life in the NT. See Rev. 3:3 and 16:15, where Jesus *himself* is the thief!

Verse 34 One of those sayings found in all religious teaching and perfectly appropriate here.

Verse 35 Dressed for action is an image from athletics or from the games.

Verse 36 Wedding language is often used in the Bible for the future Kingdom. Here it is hinted at—the master is returning *from a wedding*. In those days weddings could take some time: *With merriment they celebrated Tobias’s wedding feast for seven days, and many gifts were given to him.* (Tobit 11:18b)

Verse 37 A beatitude. Alert is not typically Lucan (6-6-1+1), perhaps reflecting a time when the immediacy of the Second Coming had relaxed somewhat. The image of the master serving the

servants is extraordinary. It is also in tension with: *So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, “We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!”* (Luke 17:10 – see the whole context for the full contrast.)

Verse 38 Probably on the Roman calculation of the watches of the night, and so between 9.00 PM and 3.00 AM. The beatitude is repeated and functions as a frame or *inclusion*.

Verse 39 It is not usual for thieves to inform their victims in advance, even in antiquity.

Verse 40 The discourse now turns to warning: it is not the *immediacy* but the *unexpectedness* of the return that is relevant.

Verse 41 The question from Peter is in Luke only. Although Matthew gives no context, the question seems not to be taken into account in the parable, and so probably not part of the earliest context.

Verse 42 Slavery is simply presumed as a social/economic phenomenon. Being a slave could range from crude ownership to virtual employment with high responsibility, regard and affection.

Verse 43 Another beatitude.

Verse 44 Cf. *Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much.* (Luke 16:10)

Verse 45 The delay of the *parousia* was indeed an issue: *Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.* (2 Peter 3:14–15)

Verse 46 The retribution is savage and unexpected in so gentle a text as Luke’s. The verb used here (*dichotomēō*, whence our *dichotomy*) means the dismemberment of a condemned person. Matthew’s edition shows his hand: *He will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.* (Matthew 24:51) The unfaithful are not really a major theme in Luke-Acts: *Jesus answered, “You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you and bear with you? Bring your son here.”* (Luke 9:41)

Verse 47 Punishment all round it seems, but in due proportion. The verb “to beat” has a range of meanings (lit. to flay, but in our texts it is less precise and means to beat or to whip). It is common

in Luke-Acts (1-3-5+3). The treatment in mind can be illustrated by Acts 5:40; 16:37; 22:19. Paul uses the word a few times: *For you put up with it when someone makes slaves of you, or preys upon you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or gives you a slap in the face.* (2 Corinthians 11:20) Anyone reading the Gospel is most likely to be identified with the slave in v. 47, because the problem is being informed, which we all are!

Verse 48 Acting badly, even without an explicit prohibition, will draw its own punishment (“lighter beating”). The summary statement captures it all very clearly, in a parallelism which starts out antithetical but ends with another twist (“even more will be demanded”).

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The opening verses of this gospel invite us to ask ourselves what do we see as our purpose in life? What are our priorities? Is our heart set on material progress and advance, or do we have other priorities? What has helped you to appreciate that there is more to your life than earthly possessions and success?

2. At times, one can sense in Jesus an urgency, as if he wanted to shake people and wake them up to take his words seriously. The parable has that tone: “Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit.” When have you found that being alert enabled you to grasp a moment of opportunity that you might easily have missed, e.g., when a child or friend gives a hint that they would like to talk and a very meaningful conversation ensues.

3. Another consideration that adds to the sense of urgency in the words of Jesus is that we only have one life, and we do not know how long that will last. So Jesus calls us on us to live in the now and to treasure our time. Sometimes we can drift aimlessly through a day, and on other occasions use a day purposefully. What difference does that make, if any, to how you experience the day?

PRAYER

O God, on whom our faith rests secure and whose kingdom we await, sustain us by word and sacrament and keep us alert for the coming of the Son of Man, that we may welcome him without delay. We ask this through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns, forever and ever. Amen.

Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen

Heb 11:1 Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. 2 Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval.

Heb 11:8 By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. 9 By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. 10 For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. 11 By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised. 12 Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, “as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.”

Heb 11:13 All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, 14 for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. 15 If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.

Heb 11:17 By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac. He who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son, 18 of whom he had been told, “It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named for you.” 19 He considered the fact that God is able even to raise someone from the dead—and figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

For four Sundays of Year C, we hear from the Letter to the Hebrews. Apart from feasts etc., the Letter is also read on five Sundays of Year B. It is a rich and complex document and, to understand it well, it might be good to take the opportunity to read through the whole letter

again.

KIND OF WRITING

The writing is in the very best Greek of the New Testament. It is rhetorically highly sophisticated and the Letter began life perhaps as a kind of homily or synthesis of homiletic teaching. The writer shares something of the worldview of Philo of Alexandria, that is, a kind of net-platonic view of forms (on earth) and realities (in heaven).

The *Letter to the Hebrews* shows the following sequence (A. Vanhoye SJ):

1:1-4	Introduction
1:5-14	Exposition
2:1-4	Exhortation
2:5-5:10	Exposition
5:11-6:20	Exhortation
7:1-10:18	Exposition
10:19-39	Exhortation
11:1-40	Exposition
12:1-13	Exhortation
12:14-13:19	Exhortation
13:20-25	Conclusion

Our reading comes from the exposition in 11:1-40. Lists such as this one here occur elsewhere: Psalms 78; 136:4-22; Wisdom 10:1-19:22; Sirach 44:16-50:29; 1 Maccabees 2:49-68 etc.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

It has been observed that Paul's Letter to the Hebrews is *not* by Paul, is *not* a letter and is *not* directed to Hebrews/Jews. Having thus cleared the decks, we may ask open questions about the Letter.

The temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed before this letter was written. Like other Jewish groups, the Christians then had to ask themselves where is the point of access now to the presence of God. Hebrews gives a profound answer, not unlike what you might find in Paul or even in the Gospel of John. The point of access is no longer a place but a person.

RELATED PASSAGES

But my righteous one will live by faith, and if he shrinks back, I take no pleasure in him. (Hebrews 10:38 NET)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 The assurance (*hypostasis*) is both objective (put there by God) and

subjective (the trust of the believer).

Verse 2 The title over the list of heroes.

Verses 3-12 Gen 15:6 is commented widely in the NT: Rom 4:3, 9, 22; Gal 3:6; Jas 2:23. “Stayed for a time” means really as an *alien* in the land (Gen 35:27). V. 10 is a commentary on vv. 8 and 9, underlining Abraham's hope in the heavenly city. God is described in words which echo the Book of Wisdom: architect and builder. Note in v. 11 that Abraham's faith is a response to God's faithfulness. In v. 12, much of the language echoes that of Paul in Rom 4:19 and 9:27.

Verses 13-16 These verses constitute a pause, as the writer reflects on the history of salvation. Thus the patriarchs themselves knew that their sojourn in the land was only temporary. Even though they were full of faith, they did not live to see the fulfilment of their hopes. These hopes were not merely terrestrial, in which case they could have returned physically. This continues the writer's elevated reflections on the last part of Psalm 95 (Heb 3-4, especially Heb 4:8). Finally, these ancestors in the faith are *our* ancestors, because they trusted in the same God and in the same promises. The heavenly city *we* enjoy was prepared for *them* too (Heb 12:22).

Verses 17-19 The author alludes to the shocking test of Abraham in Gen 22. Jewish tradition uses various approaches to make moral sense of this “text of terror.” In Hebrews, Abraham is taken to be motivated by faith in the resurrection of dead. Although clearly anachronistic, resurrection faith was originally trust in the faithfulness of God himself.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. If you were to name your own heroes of the faith, who would they be?
2. Faith here is a kind of immense trust against appearances. What has my own experience been?
3. Our reading takes “the long view,” that is, over the whole of salvation history. What about the long view of my own journey of faith and salvation?

PRAYER

Help us, companion God, to know your presence with us throughout the pilgrimage of faith. Give us the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen. Thus, like Abraham, may we place our trust in you. Amen.

The saints share alike the same things, both blessings and dangers

Wis. 18:6 That night was made known beforehand to our ancestors,
so that they might rejoice in sure knowledge of the oaths
in which they trusted.
7 The deliverance of the righteous
and the destruction of their enemies
were expected by your people.
8 For by the same means by which you punished our enemies
you called us to yourself and glorified us.
9 For in secret the holy children of good people offered sacrifices,
and with one accord agreed to the divine law,
so that the saints would share alike the same things,
both blessings and dangers;
and already they were singing the praises of the ancestors.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The link with the Gospel may seem obscure at first glance, but it is there: *The deliverance of the righteous and the destruction of their enemies were expected by your people.*

KIND OF WRITING

This is wisdom or sapiential literature, but of a very high order. It combines traditional biblical wisdom themes with the Greek culture of Roman Egypt. The review of the Old Testament from Adam to Moses shows great skill and subtlety. Although major figures are paraded before us, none is, in fact, named—the reader must contribute to the understanding of this oblique writing.

The whole section from chapters 17-18 reflects on the events prior to the first Passover and the Exodus. Wis 18:5-25 is the sixth antithesis, contrasting the fate of the firstborn of the Egyptians and the fate of the Israelites.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

Outline of the book of Wisdom:

1-6 – an invitation to Wisdom contrasting good and bad people.

7-9 – Solomon's prayer for and praise of Wisdom.

10-19 – A review of the history of salvation from Adam to Moses

Diane Bergant writes very perceptively:

Unquestionably, the author lives in a pluralistic society, where traditional values do not enjoy the prominence they may have had in earlier times. Opposing views challenge former ideological hegemony; the accomplishments of others cultures rival, even outclass, traditional values and practices. He is the kind of teacher they would turn to for direction in reinterpreting that faith in

a new cultural context... The Solomonic authority given to the teaching of this author legitimates cross-cultural recontextualisation.

Diane Bergant
Israel's Wisdom Literature, 156, 157-8.

Comparisons with our time are evident.

RELATED PASSAGES

The background is all of Ex 11:1-12:32. Here is the key excerpt:

At midnight the Lord struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sat on his throne to the firstborn of the prisoner who was in the dungeon, and all the firstborn of the livestock. Pharaoh arose in the night, he and all his officials and all the Egyptians; and there was a loud cry in Egypt, for there was not a house without someone dead. Then he summoned Moses and Aaron in the night, and said, "Rise up, go away from my people, both you and the Israelites! Go, worship the Lord, as you said. Take your flocks and your herds, as you said, and be gone. And bring a blessing on me too!" (Exodus 12:29-32)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verses 6 The opening words are emphatic: *That night*. Our ancestors (literally our fathers), that is, the patriarchs of old. The Israelites were forewarned and protected, in the Exodus story. The oaths in which they trusted: *For he remembered his holy promise, and Abraham, his servant. So he brought his people out with joy, his chosen ones with singing.* (Psalms 105:42-43; cf. Gen 22:16-18; 26:3-4.)

Verse 7 Deliverance: that is, salvation or liberation from death that night, but also from the condition of slavery. The contrast of destinies is clear. Later in the



chapter, the agent of this destruction is identified as the all-powerful word of God: *For while gentle silence enveloped all things, and night in its swift course was now half gone, your all-powerful word leaped from heaven, from the royal throne, into the midst of the land that was doomed, a stern warrior carrying the sharp sword of your authentic command, and stood and filled all things with death, and touched heaven while standing on the earth.* (Wisdom 18:14-16)

Verse 8 The angel of death struck the Egyptians and spared the Israelites, as he "passed over" them. Cf. *For through the very things by which their enemies were punished, they themselves received benefit in their need.* (Wisdom 11:5)

Verse 9 The communion sacrifice of Passover symbolised the solidarity of the people, as they faced a common destiny of grace and danger. Much later Passover traditions are read back into the earlier accounts.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Did I ever experience a coming together with other people through a shared moment of threat or danger? This is the very thing which lies behind the experience of the first and subsequent Passovers. Our Eucharist leads us through communion to being the body of Christ.

2. Keeping vigil in hope and expectation is often the lot of parents with their children or of relatives with sick people. Can I name any recent experiences?

PRAYER

God of freedom, set us free from all that binds us, that we know the deep freedom of the children of God. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

THE LITURGY

Wisdom 18:6-9; Psalm 33 (32); Hebrew 11:1-2, 8-19; Luke 12:32-48

READINGS 1 AND 3

The Gospel teaches watchfulness and the Wisdom reading deals with keeping the vigil of Passover. Both readings invite us to fully alert living, lest we miss the moment of grace.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 33 (32) is a reasonable fit with the theme of the reading. The relevant verses seem to be: *They are happy, whose God is the Lord, the people he has chosen as his own.*

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Wisdom 18:6-9

Our reading is a late reflection on the experience of the first Passover, when the Israelites were spared. The link with the Gospel reading is that of keeping watch in hope of salvation.

Second reading

Hebrew 11:1-2, 8-19

What is faith really? This reading describes faith, analyses faith and celebrates faith. As we listen, we can ask ourselves who are *our* heroes of faith today? Who am I, as a believer?

Gospel

Luke 12:32-48

Given the times in which we live, this reading may resonate more closely than usual with our experience. Wouldn't it be great to have purses that did not wear out! More importantly, we are to live "dressed for action," alert and fully alive.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Monday 11 August

St Clare, religious

Deuteronomy 10:12-22

This reading may surprise people who are uncomfortable with the Old Testament. It teaches first of all the *love* of God, that is, the love we should have for God. The second paragraph should speak to us today, conscious as we are of the stranger in our midst.

Matthew 17:22-27

Jesus' own real freedom in relation to civil authorities is wittily reflected in this rather legendary story.

Tuesday 12 August

St Jane Frances de Chantal, religious; St Muredach, bishop; St Attracta, virgin; St Lelia, virgin

Deuteronomy 31:1-8

While the setting is extraordinary, we are witnessing here something familial: the transition of leadership from one figure (Moses) to another (Joshua). The key sentence is a guarantee: *he (the Lord) will be with you.* Today, this reading, taken literally, is difficult. But by means of this text, ancient Israelites portrayed their God as a God of grace and faithfulness, the God of covenant reliability amidst all harshness and unpredictability of life.

Matthew 18:1-5, 10, 12-14

We could easily miss the culture force of the illustration. A child in the time of Jesus was not a symbol of innocent but of powerlessness. To welcome those without power is to welcome Jesus himself.

Wednesday 13 August

Sts Pontian, bishop of Rome, and Hippolytus, priest, martyrs; St Fachtna, bishop

Deuteronomy 34:1-12

According to biblical tradition, Moses died within view of the promised land. Our reading describes his death and burial and gives a final, very moving tribute to the great leader.

Matthew 18:15-20

In this Gospel we are overhearing practices developed in the community of Matthew, most likely centred in Antioch. What to do with people who "stray"? The procedure is in several stages, following common sensitivity and biblical precedent.

Thursday 14 August

St Maximilian Kolbe, priest, martyr

Joshua 3:7-11, 13-17

The final entry in to the Promised Land under Joshua is described as a minor

echo of the Exodus. The Jordan stands still to let them pass. The Psalm is a perfect match.

Matthew 18:21-19:1

This is a very sharp wisdom tale. Simply put, if you have been forgiven, you in turn must be forgiving. It may be best to think of it as an extended meditation on the Lord's Prayer: forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.

Friday 15 August

Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary



Apocalypse 11:19, 12:1-6, 10

This unusual reading is really about the motherhood of the church and the martyrdom of early Christians. By an accommodated interpretation, it is read for the feast.

1 Corinthians 15:20-26

Our text is really a good example of Christian apocalyptic. One of the concerns of apocalyptic writings was the sequence of the end or when we will see the total victory over death. Paul believed in this, but knew it was not yet.

Luke 1:39-56

The prayer of Mary can still cause surprise because it is not about having a baby but about social reversal or revolution. We overhear in these words the prayer of the Christian *anawim* YHWH or the poor of the Lord.

Saturday 16 August

St Stephen of Hungary

Joshua 24:14-29

A covenant renewal ceremony is recounted, something we regularly "do" in the Lord's Supper. As we hear, the commitment involved is scary!

Matthew 19:13-15

It might be reassuring that the disciples got in the way so early!! Jesus corrected them and received the little children.