

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(1 Kings 3:5.7-12 / Matthew 13:44-52)
26.07.2020

When the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream and said to him that he could ask for what he would like, the young king, recognising himself to be unskilled in leadership, asked for *a heart to understand so as to be able to discern between good and evil*.

What Solomon requested was a heart that would enable him to govern wisely those whom God had confided to his care.

I wonder if that is what we would have asked for if we had have been in Solomon's shoes.

If I am honest, I suspect that our desire might not have been just as clear-cut as that of the young king; not all of us would have put discernment at the top of our list. I am inclined to think that some of us would have more readily requested for ourselves the very things we are told Solomon did not ask for, but nonetheless received, alongside wisdom: long life and riches, prosperity in our undertakings, victory over our enemies, etc. We are told how Solomon's demand for *the gift of discerning judgement*, along with *a heart wise and shrewd*, won favour in God's sight. What is really important to grasp in this Old Testament passage is the unselfish nature of Solomon's request. What the young king asked for was not for himself alone; it was not a request based solely on self-interest. Solomon longed for wisdom and discernment so as to be able to lead and guide the people correctly; so as to be able to lead them in the way that the Lord would have them follow.

Aware of the importance of the role confided to him to be ruler of God's people, Solomon knew that it was the Lord who was ultimately the shepherd and guardian of the flock. He grasped that it was the Lord who was the Sovereign, the real ruler, the true king over Israel.

Evidently the juvenile monarch was someone properly situated before God. (At least at the outset of his reign!) That Solomon put his concern for the people before his own desires is an important lesson for us.

Our temptation can be to consider the fulfilment of our own desires as the fundamental priority. We can be foolish enough to confound our own superficial desires for our lives with God's profound desire for us. This happens when we fail to apply proper discernment criteria. Let me explain myself a little. While it is true and vital for us to understand that what God wants for us is what we truly want for ourselves, we have to be humble enough to recognise that many of us – if not most of us – do not really know what we want a lot of the time.

For this reason it is so important for us to plead with the Lord to give us wisdom. It is vital for us to ask the Lord to help us discern what He wants for our lives. The Lord needs to help us decipher what we really desire for ourselves. Our big problem is to be so undecided; not to really know what we want; to dither; to vacillate and to be unable to accept the renunciations that are an inevitable result of every life choice.

A privileged way for us to come to know ourselves and what God's wants for our lives is through prayerful contact with the word of God contained in Sacred Scripture. Listening to today's Gospel passage as I did, with a Benedictine ear, the importance of reference to the Bible was brought home to me rather forcefully. In his Rule for Monks, Benedict makes use of an image employed by Jesus at the end of today's Gospel passage: the image of a householder bringing forth from his storeroom things both new and old. Benedict uses that image to speak of the abbot's mission to lead, direct and instruct the community how to walk in God's way with the Gospel as their guide. Benedict sees as fundamental to the abbot's mission his helping the brethren make sense out of their personal lives and helping the community discern the direction the Lord would have it follow in its communal life with the Scriptures as their roadmap or compass.

Saying that, I find myself recalling St James' teaching. In chapter 1, verses 21-25, of his Epistle we have section which speaks of the Sacred Scriptures being akin to a mirror. He presents the Bible as a kind of spiritual mirror in whose light we do well to look at our lives. James writes: *The person who looks steadily into God's Law contained in Sacred Scripture will not only remember what is written, but do what the words say and God will bless that person greatly in all they do.*

For Benedict Christian discipleship is about living guided by the insights of the Sacred Scriptures as Christ opens them to us in the many ways He does – including through the mediation of the Spiritual Father of the community who is to help deepen his brethren's appreciation of the relevance of the Bible for their personal lives and that of the community in its ensemble.

For Benedict – as for the rich monastic tradition on which he drew and which he, in turn, marked for subsequent generations – a true Christian life is a life guided by the Holy Spirit: a life that is wisely discerned.

Possibly no quality has been more characteristic of the monastic tradition than discernment. This is true of the pre-Benedictine monastic tradition, just as it is true of that of the many other forms of Consecrated Life which emerged subsequent to Benedictinism – one thinks especially of the Ignatian tradition, rooted in the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius Loyola, wherein the whole emphasis is placed upon discerning the spirits.

Discernment is about picking out and tuning into the word and will of God in the midst of all the conflicting voices which emanate from so many quarters all around us, and doing so by placing special emphasis upon listening to the words and will of God as they are revealed to us in the Bible.

In St Athanasius' *'Life of St Anthony the Great, Father of Monks'*, we read: *To all the monks who came to Anthony he gave the same advice. After speaking to them of the importance of placing their confidence in the Lord and loving Him and keeping careful watch over their thoughts, Anthony told them that they should flee conceit and pray continually; he further told them that they should sing Psalms before sleeping and after, and commit to heart the commandments enjoined in the Scriptures.* This last point actually meant learning Scripture passages off by heart, so as to be able to hold them in their memories, in a way that would enable them to refer to Scripture passages constantly, even at those times when they did not have a Bible in their possession.

For Pachomian monasticism which placed such stress upon living together in community, in good and healthy fraternal relations, the word of God was also seen as essential. Holy Scripture was presented as the source of the monks' communion with God and with each other. We read in the *'Life of Saint Pachomius'*: *They lived a cenobitic life. Pachomius established for them, in a Rule, an irreproachable lifestyle and traditions profitable for their souls. These he took from the Sacred Scriptures.* The Rule of Pachomian monks was the Bible! The Scriptures were and remain *the Rule of the Rule* for all monks! In the same ways families can and should be able to see them as the guide they need for their lives. How important for families to read and pray the Bible together in their homes!

In its simplest definition discernment is nothing more than the ability to decide between good and evil, truth and error, right and wrong. This is made clear in the Bible itself again and again. Later tradition will speak of discerning between consolation and desolation, joy and sorrow. Discernment is always about *testing the spirits to see if they come from God* – as Paul suggests. It should intervene in the Christian life at every point along the way. It will do so if we develop the habit of looking at all things concerning life in the light of God's inspired word. In this respect there are lines in the teaching of St John-Paul II contained in his Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* which I find particularly encouraging. I take as a guide for my own way through life. I also propose to my brethren to follow the same pathway.

Let me share John-Paul's insights with you. I quote: [When] *the word of God is brought to bear on life, (...) it projects the light of that wisdom which is a gift of the Spirit. It is therefore of great benefit to meditate upon it regularly...* The pope went on to point to the example of many Founders and Foundresses of Institutes of Consecrated Life as well as other people who responded to God's call, drawing attention to the fact that all were *inspired by the texts of Sacred Scripture in accepting their vocation and in discerning the charism and mission they themselves lived and in which they engaged others with them.*

John-Paul II's immediate successor, Pope Benedict, followed up on his predecessor's point here when he proclaimed in a 'General Audience Catechesis on Prayer' (number 26): *We must bring the events of our lives into our prayer, in order to seek their most profound significance. And we too, like the first Christian community, allowing ourselves to be illumined by the Word of God and meditating on Sacred Scripture, may learn to see that God is present in our lives, even in moments of difficulty. In the light of the Scriptures we come to see that everything is part of a plan of love in which the final victory over evil, sin and death truly is that of goodness, grace, life and God.* Here Pope Benedict takes basically the same starting point as John-Paul II. *God has a personal plan for each of us, and we must listen to Him to learn what it is. The origin and goal of this plan is love: love and life.* I conclude from this that to do God's will best we need to find the place where we can love and live best; the place where we can love and live most. For Pope Benedict love is the element of a vocation. He states: *Love is the origin of every vocation, and every vocation finds its fulfilment in love.*

While God has a plan for us, and He always takes the initiative in our regard, there is a point where we have to engage ourselves to meet Him by taking the initiative in His regard, the initiative to give our lives to Him. That is what we saw Solomon do in our first reading. The young king consecrated his already God-given vocation to be ruler of the people to the Lord, asking the Almighty to help him respond to the call He had received by giving him the wisdom he stood in need of to walk in the Lord's way and guide the people along the right path.

Pope Francis illustrates for us each and every day in his homilies at his daily Eucharist at *La Casa Santa Marta* what living in the light of the Sacred Scriptures entails. He looks at life as it presents itself to us each day in the light the Church's lectionary readings cast upon it. For Pope Francis *listening, discerning and living* go hand in hand. In a meditation upon Jesus' sermon in the synagogue of Nazareth, the place where Christ began His messianic mission, Pope Francis had this to say: *In His [local] synagogue of Nazareth [Jesus] listened to the word, discerned the content of the mission entrusted to Him by the Father, and proclaimed that He came to accomplish it.* Pope Francis often points out to us that things aren't always clear-cut. He dares to remind us that they weren't always clear-cut even for Jesus. Pope Francis suggests – here I quote him: *We need to learn to listen carefully to the Master's word and the story of His life, but also to be attentive to the details of our own daily lives, in order to learn how to view things with the eyes of faith, and to keep ourselves open to the surprises of the Spirit.* For Pope Francis to remind us: *We will never discover the special, personal calling God has in mind for us if we remain enclosed in ourselves, in our usual way of doing things, in the apathy of those who fritter away their lives in their own little world.* If we stay closed in ourselves, rather than being, as Solomon was, open to others we could miss our chance in life. To return to Pope Francis' words: *We could lose the chance to dream big and to play our part in the unique and original story that God wants to write with us.*

May what we have heard this morning encourage us *to listen, to discern and to live.* May it encourage us to engage in a prayerful reading of the Scriptures in the hope of finding therein the roadmap for life we all stand in need of. This is surely what the word of God addressed to us today bids us do. From familiarity with God's word may we all draw the light we need for our individual and communal discernments!

