

This Sunday's Readings – the 19th Sunday in Ordinary Time – The main themes of today's readings are that of faith and preparedness.

The first reading is from the Book of Wisdom. The St. Charles Borromeo Bible Study of Picayune, MS, explains the very interesting origins of this book – “The Book of Wisdom, also known as the Wisdom of Solomon, is listed in the Muratorian Fragment [the oldest (second century) listing of writings approved as scripture for use in the Church of Rome] as a New Testament book. The book is not in the Hebrew canon and it is certain that Greek was the original language. It was certainly written after the completion of the Septuagint (middle of the 2nd century B.C.) and earlier than the New Testament. It is thought to date from the middle of the first century B.C. which would make it the last of the Old Testament books to be written”. Even though the author is unknown, it is known that he came from Alexandria, Egypt, and had an excellent knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures, especially the Hebrew Exodus. The book came at a time of persecution not only from the outside but also even by apostate Jews. In this first reading, we see that the Israelites were always prepared for the Exodus. They were ready to move out at any time. The journey began with the first Passover meal at night. It was believed by the Hebrews that the Messiah would come at night during a commemoration of that first Passover. For both Christians and Jews, night was a time of vigilance and prayer. Note the similarity to the Last Supper, which was a commemoration of that first Passover and where Jesus was the promised Messiah. Fr. Roger Karban in his 1998 syndicated column explains how faith played an important role in understanding this reading – “As the author of Wisdom reminds us (Wis 18:6-9), participants in the most important event in Jewish history -- the Exodus -- had to have faith in order to understand what was really happening. "That night (of the Passover)," he writes, "was known beforehand to our ancestors, that, with sure knowledge of the oaths in which they put their faith, they might have courage." Only faith enabled them to see the life being offered them through the death of the Egyptians' firstborns”.

In the Gospel reading from Luke, the themes of vigilance and preparedness are really hammered home. In the parable of the “Vigilant and Faithful Servants”, Jesus tells us – “You also must be prepared, for at an hour that you do not expect, the Son of Man will come”. This is in reference to the second coming of Christ or Parousia. It was believed at that time that the second coming was imminent. However, please note verse 45 – “My master is delayed in coming”. This is Luke's way of saying that the second coming of Christ might not be that imminent. Remember that Luke wrote his Gospel around 85 AD. That is why we need to be especially prepared and vigilant at all times and not be distracted by the temptations of the material world. Fr. Roger Karban in his 1998 syndicated column adds this faith based comment on this reading – “Yet, no matter how faith helped God's people pick out the real in the past, Luke is concerned that his community concentrate on a faith-interpreted present (Lk 12:32-48). Rooted in a Christian tradition in which people believed Jesus was going to return quickly in the Parousia, Luke sees the necessity to modify that faith for his readers. All around him, he hears the lament, "My master is taking His time about coming." But instead of joining in the same chorus, Luke adapts his faith. He becomes the first Christian author to presume Jesus isn't going to return in his lifetime. He focuses his community's eyes on a different

aspect of the reality around them. No longer are we to see the present simply as a preparation for the future. Now the present is perceived as having a value in itself. For Luke, the "faithful, farsighted steward" isn't the person who can predict the exact time of the Parousia, but someone who lives as though the master's already at the door, demanding an account of what's happening right here and now".

How do we interpret "time" in these readings? John J. Pilch in his *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle C* explains the differences of how we interpret "time" in our Western culture and how the Mediterranean people of Jesus' time interpreted "time" in their culture – "More than thirty years ago the Pontifical Biblical Commission instructed readers of the synoptic Gospels to pay careful attention to the three stages of tradition in which Jesus' teachings have been handed on: stage one–Jesus himself; stage two–the apostles' preaching; stage three–the evangelists, who composed their Gospels more than forty years after Jesus died. In 1993 the same commission published a document entitled "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church," in which it praised the insights from cultural anthropology that can shed so much fresh light on the Bible and make the characters and story lines culturally plausible. These "Sunday by Sunday" reflections attempt to describe the most plausible Mediterranean historical and cultural scenario for the Gospels at any of the levels. The scenario for today's selection helps a reader to see at least two of them rather clearly.

MEDITERRANEAN TIME

Readers need an appropriate "time" scenario to read these verses. While Americans are normally future oriented, peasants are too deeply mired in present concerns such as "daily bread" to think about the future at all. Mediterranean culture is primarily focused on the present, albeit a wide present including tomorrow and yesterday. Yet verses 35 to 48 clearly have a future thrust. With each generation of believers, the original statement recedes more and more into the past and makes the future seem increasingly distant from the gospel point of view. The question, therefore, is: Does this future thrust derive from Jesus or from Luke or both? And how far into the future does each one see?

JESUS AND TIME

In the Gospels Jesus often shows himself to be counter-structural in his culture. Where the culture holds one value orientation, Jesus proposes an alternative. Peasants were intensely oriented to the present moment; elites (e.g., the Sadducees) and scholars of the tradition (e.g., the scribes) were primarily oriented to the past. Hardly anyone was oriented toward the future. The "future" thrust of these verses, which call for watchfulness and fidelity, contrasts strongly with the typical peasant's spontaneous response to the present moment. When the cat's away, the mice will play. When the master is gone, the servant who feels so inspired will beat other slaves, eat, drink, and get drunk (v. 45). In his typical counter-structural stance, Jesus urges at least a little concern for the future, a rather proximate future. In his parables he speaks of the unpredictable but

sure return of the master. He also says: “The Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”

LUKE AND TIME

Writing his Gospel approximately fifty to fifty-five years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, Luke, like his readers, is all too familiar with a common lament. The risen Jesus was expected to return again, but his return is delayed now for some fifty years. Some are dying, others are frustrated, and still others begin to throw care to the winds. Luke, therefore, calls for continued vigilance and fidelity: “Have your belt cinched tight (freeing the feet for swift movement) and your lamps lit” (v. 35), for “the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour” (v. 40). Americans are quite definitely and primarily future-oriented, and frequently neglect the present. American believers could benefit by imitating the present-orientation of their ancestors in the Faith. This is the kind of balance that Jesus sought in his own culture”.

Joe Juellich, Liturgy Team