

23rd Sunday per Annum - C
Wisdom 9:13-18b;
Philemon 9-10, 12-17;
Luke 14:25-33
Little Flower - 9/4/22

My Brothers and Sisters,

If last week's reading from Sirach called us to be humble, to see ourselves as God sees us, today's reading from Wisdom warns that our understanding and judgment are often distorted: "*For the corruptible body burdens the soul and the earthen shelter weighs down the mind that has many concerns.*" Although the point seems clear, the explanation is not so easy.

When I was in college, St. Meinrad was one of few colleges in the United States to require an undergraduate thesis. The title of my thesis was "The Human Will: Necessitated and Free." We always talk about free will, but that is only half the story. We can only choose from among choices in which we find some good.

Because of original sin, our perceptions and judgments about what is good can be very wrong. For example, our society idolizes possessions, power, and pleasure. Therefore, many people seek to find their happiness in one or more of these idols rather than in intimacy with God and others. We might ask ourselves, for example, what things we allow to take priority over Sunday Eucharist.

I believe that when we die, when we are stripped of our bodies, then we will see clearly that possessions, power, and pleasure are incapable of making us truly happy. We will see that true happiness consists in fulfilling the two great commandments of the New Testament, loving God and loving others. Therefore, I believe that the punishment of hell will be complete alienation from God and others, in other words, complete isolation.

However, distortions of our perceptions and judgments can occur in every area of our lives. We can cite all kinds of practical examples of such distortions. For example, from 42 years of Tribunal experience, I can say with great confidence that in romantic relationships, the saying "Love is blind" is true. This is why so many decisions to marry are bad decisions. Couples will lock into a decision to marry based primarily on physical attraction or infatuation.

We hear so much today about dysfunctional families. Individuals from dysfunctional families often lack the ability to separate logical thinking from emotional thinking. We have all met people who are incapable of dealing rationally with certain issues. For example, some parents are totally unable to deal logically with their children's teachers when it comes to problems in school.

Another example of distortion is tunnel vision, the inability to see the forest for the trees. In decision making, some individuals are only able to think short-term, never long-term. Likewise, they can only see the effects of choices on themselves or on those who are very close to them. For example, in the past, college students could often get good summer jobs in manufacturing plants. Some would then think of quitting college because the pay seemed so good.

It is because of our distorted perceptions and judgments that we need moral norms. The Church's moral norms represent the Christian wisdom of the ages. When we are faced with moral choices, it is often the worst time for us to have to decide what is right and wrong. It is good that we can fall back on moral laws, confident that they do represent the Christian wisdom of the ages. We really are back to humility: we need to be open to the wisdom of the past and listen to and learn from others.

My brothers and sisters, Paul's letter to Philemon is the shortest of Paul's letters. To use the language of children's literature, it is not even a chapter book. Paul had converted and grown close to Philemon's runaway slave Onesimus. He wanted to keep Onesimus with him but did not feel free to do that. Therefore, he appealed to Philemon to accept Onesimus as a brother in the Lord. In Galatians, Paul wrote, "*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus*" [3:28]. In this time of so many divisions, this is perhaps the most important piece of God's wisdom for us today.