

The Twenty-eighth Sunday of Ordinary Time

(Year B)

<i>First Reading</i>	Wisdom 7:7-11
<i>Response</i>	Fill us with your love, O Lord, and we will sing for joy!
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 90:12-13, 14-15, 16-17
<i>Second Reading</i>	Hebrews 4:12-13
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
<i>Gospel</i>	Mark 10:17-30

The Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time takes us to the Gospel of Mark 10 with the famous story of the encounter between Jesus and the rich young man and his question about inheriting eternal life. So let's turn to that gospel, read it together, and then we'll see if we can try to unpack it and look at how the readings from the Old Testament today fit with the New Testament and shed light upon the New Testament. So Mark 10:

And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: `Do not kill, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.'" And he said to him, "Teacher, all these I have observed from my youth." And Jesus looking upon him loved him, and said to him, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." At that saying his countenance fell, and he went away sorrowful; for he had great possessions. And Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!" And the disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the

kingdom of God." And they were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "With men it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God."¹

Alright, so what's going on in this passage? There's a lot of questions that arise as we work through it, so we'll walk through it step-by-step. The first one is just the young man's question, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" That's a really important question. Notice something about this question; notice that Jesus does not respond to the man by saying well just accept me as your personal Lord and Savior, right, all you have to do is believe in me — even though obviously those are important. He'll say that elsewhere in the gospel that believing in him, having faith in him is important. It's fascinating that Jesus doesn't answer this question like, say, Martin Luther would've had him answer it. What he says to the man is, "You know the commandments...", and then he lists these different commandments, notice this, from the second tablet of the 10 Commandments; he focuses on the second half. So you might recall that in the Book of Exodus 20, the 10 Commandments are divided up into two tablets, and traditionally the first tablet has to do with love of God, right: avoiding idolatry and blasphemy, keeping the Sabbath.

The second tablet refers to love of neighbor and those are the commandments Jesus focuses on when it comes to inheriting eternal life: honor your father and mother, avoiding murder, avoiding adultery, avoiding theft, avoiding false witness; not committing any of those sins are the sins that he lists when he speaks to the young man, right. So I just pause on that for just a second because sometimes Catholics are accused of being un-biblical because of our focus on keeping the commandments. Sometimes Catholics are accused of teaching a works righteousness religion that earns our way into heaven because we insist on keeping the commandments. The reality of the fact is that the authentic Catholic faith and its emphasis on obedience to the commandments is something that flows straight out of the teaching of Christ himself. When asked what he needed to do to inherit eternal life, Jesus told the young man to keep the commandments, right. This is an

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

essential part of what it means to be a disciple and it's an essential part of entering the kingdom of heaven. Now it doesn't encompass everything — we're going to see that in just a minute, — but it is an essential component, okay. So that's the first point.

Alright, the second aspect of Jesus' encounter with the young man that's interesting to me is that in Mark's gospel, Mark highlights in particular two elements. First, that the young man kneels before Jesus and that he says to him good teacher what must I do. Now those two elements, good teacher and him kneeling before Jesus, are interesting because they prompt a response from Jesus that's a little puzzling at first glance. When Jesus responds to him he says, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone." Now in the Greek it actually is a little bit stronger because Jesus says no one is good but the one God, *heis ho theos*. *Heis* meaning one, God from the Greek word *theos*. So *heis ho theos*, no one is good but the one God. Two elements of that are interesting. First, the one God in a Jewish setting would be an allusion to the famous Shema. The Hebrew expression:

Hear, O Israel: the Lord is God, the Lord is one.

It's a quotation from Deuteronomy 6:4-6. It was recited by Jews three times a day in the First Century A.D. You over and over, to this day Jews will say the Lord is one, the Lord is God, hear O Israel. This is one of their basic prayers. And so when Jesus says, "no one is good but the one God," on the one hand he's alluding to the famous Scripture that is the foundation for monotheism. For the idea, the belief, the conviction among Jews that there is only one God. And yet at the same time he says something strange to the young man. He says, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but the one God." Now that has led some interpreters to argue, Aha look, Jesus here is denying that he's God, right, he's denying his divinity, and skeptics will actually say that, they will point to this passage from Mark 10. Skeptics today who say, oh, Jesus was just a prophet, maybe he saw himself as the Messiah, but he never claimed to be God. They'll point to Mark 10 and say look right here, Jesus denies that he's God when he says, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone." I mean doesn't that sound like Jesus is saying I'm not God, God alone is good. Well, maybe at first glance, but it's important to remember that Jesus speaks in riddles over and over again. It's also important to

note that if you read it carefully, Jesus never denies that he's good and he never denies that he's God. What he does is he poses a question to a young man who is kneeling before him, and he says why do you call me good, when as you know, and any Jew would know, no one is good, truly good, except the one God. So as we'll see in a few moments, in the church's tradition here, the church fathers always interpreted this passage as not a denial of Jesus' divinity but a question, a riddle, that is inviting the young man to move beyond the appearance of Jesus as just one more good teacher and to recognize the truth of the fact that Jesus is in fact the one God who is truly good, right, and who's come down from heaven as man to give salvation to his people.

You can actually see that this is implied in Jesus' question by looking at the shocking aftermath of Jesus' statement. After he tells the young man to keep the commandments, he does something really unprecedented, he adds something to the Decalogue. He adds something to the 10 Commandments, right. Now most Jews would say: "You want to enter into eternal life? You have to keep the commandments, you have to keep the Decalogue," but Jesus says well actually you're lacking something, right. When the young man says hey, I've kept all of those commandments, I haven't killed anyone, I haven't stolen, I've honored my father and mother; Jesus says this, you still lack something. What do you lack? He says, "Go, sell what you have, and give to the poor...[then] come, follow me." So notice two elements here. What is this young man lacking? What is going to keep him from entering into eternal life, inheriting the kingdom of God? First, his attachment to his wealth, and second, his unwillingness to follow Jesus as a disciple. What Jesus is saying to him is, in other words, you not only have to keep the commandments, you also have to detach yourself from your possessions and you have to come and you have to be my disciple; you have to follow me. That's the 11th commandment so to speak; you have to follow Jesus.

Now press pause there for a moment. Those verses alone make it clear that when Jesus says, "why do you call me good," he's not denying that he himself is good, because if he were denying that he himself were good it would be absurd for him to say "oh, I'm not good and, by the way, in order to enter eternal life you have to come and follow me and be my disciple." That doesn't make any sense. Think about it, if Jesus was denying that he was God when he says, "Why do you call me

good? No one is good but God alone," he would also be denying that he was good. If he was denying that he was good, it would be absurd for him to tell the man that if you want to enter into eternal life you have to leave everything and come and follow me, right. But if he's God who's become man, then the radical call that he's making to the young man, and the radical addition of discipleship to the 10 Commandments makes sense. In other words, who has the authority to add to the Shema and to the 10 Commandments? Well it's the God who gave the Shema and gave the 10 Commandments, who's now become man in Jesus Christ.

You can see the radicalness of this demand, because what happens to the young man? After hearing these words his face falls and he goes away sad because he had great possessions. So he ends up unfortunately, tragically choosing his possessions over Christ; he chooses his possessions over becoming a disciple of Jesus. Then Jesus takes that tragic rejection of discipleship and he uses it as an opportunity to teach all of the disciples and all of the audience around him the danger, the spiritual danger, of being rich, the spiritual danger of wealth, the spiritual danger of having possessions. Here he uses the famous image, he says, "How hard will it be for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!" And notice what it says in Mark, the disciples were amazed at his words. Now why are they amazed at his words? Well the answer's real simple. It's because in the Old Testament and in First Century Judaism, and even today, the idea was very popular that if someone had wealth and someone had possessions it was a sign of divine blessing, it was a sign of divine favor, right. Think of Job in the Old Testament, who has many children, many herds, many cattle. Abraham, same thing, he's a patriarch of a tribe, he's blessed by God; he has tribes and cattle and wealth. All these things are seen as a sign of divine blessing, and in one sense they are. At the same time, though, they are also spiritually dangerous when our ultimate goal is made clear as being the kingdom of God, inheriting eternal life. So the disciples are kind of amazed and Jesus again doesn't back down, he ratchets things up. He says, "How hard it is for those who trust in riches to enter the kingdom of God!" Notice the emphasis on not just possessing them but being attached to them, putting one's confidence in riches, putting one's confidence in possessions rather than God.

Then he gives this famous analogy for just how dangerous wealth is. He says, "It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into

the kingdom of God.” This is a classic case of Jesus using hyperbole, of using a dramatic, exaggerated image to drive home a very important point. So we've seen him previously do this in the Gospel of Mark in chapter 9 when he said, you know, if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off, if your eye causes you sin, pluck it out. That's hyperbole, it's exaggeration, he doesn't actually want a bunch of one-eye'd, you know, one-armed — I was going to say flying purple people eaters but that's not in the Bible — one eyed, one armed, one legged disciples walking around. He's not calling for people to dismember themselves, he's using an image of the gravity of sin and how dangerous sin is. The same thing's true here, the image is virtually absurd. I mean if you think about a camel, it would've been one of the largest animals they would've known in the Holy Land; a camel's a big animal. If you think about a needle, and the eye of a needle, it would be proverbially one of the smallest things that you would encounter in your daily life. So how difficult is it to shove a camel through the eye of a needle? Well it's impossible to do that, and that's how hard it is for someone who trusts in their possessions, for somebody who's rich to get into the kingdom of heaven. You can see that this is the meaning, the thrust of the saying because the disciples respond by saying well, throw up their hands, who can be saved then? In other words, if it's impossible than no one's going to make it. Jesus looked at them and said well, “With man it is impossible, but not with God, for all things are possible with God.”

So that's the kind of consoling word of grace there at the end. All of us face the temptation to be attached to this world and to worldly possessions, and it's really impossible for us to get to heaven apart from God's grace. That verse where Jesus says that is really important because it preserves us from a heresy called Pelagianism. Pelagianism was something that arose four centuries after the New Testament, but it's something that's always been around. It's the temptation to think that I can earn my way into heaven by my human efforts apart from grace. I can just strive really, really, really hard to do the right thing and I'll be a good person and that's what will earn me a place in the kingdom of heaven. The reality is no, entering into the kingdom of heaven, although it does require for us to be faithful to commandments, although it does require for us to be faithful to Christ and be disciples at the end of the day, every single person who makes it into the kingdom of heaven does it because God gives us the grace to do it, right. Jesus' statement here just points out the essential nature of grace, and he uses it to show that it is

impossible for someone who is wealthy, who is attached to their possessions to enter into the kingdom of heaven. As human beings alone it's impossible, but with God all things are possible, all things are possible through his grace.

Okay, so that's the basics of this very rich, very complex account of Jesus' encounter with the rich man as it is in the Gospel of Mark. I love Mark's version of this. I just think it's a really dynamic and fascinating episode. With that in mind then, let's go back to the Old Testament reading for today, because it's one of those times when we're reading from a Catholic book of the Old Testament, the Book of Wisdom, only found in the Catholic Old Testament. I love it when the lectionary uses this book because it's such a beautiful book. In this case, we read a section from the Wisdom of Solomon on wealth, and this is what it says. By the way as I'm reading this too, in Wisdom of Solomon 7:7-11, it's Solomon speaking. So the author is speaking in the person of Solomon, and so Solomon says this:

Therefore I prayed, and understanding was given me; I called upon God, and the spirit of wisdom came to me. I preferred her to scepters and thrones, and I accounted wealth as nothing in comparison with her. 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. I loved her more than health and beauty, and I chose to have her rather than light, because her radiance never ceases. All good things came to me along with her, and in her hands uncounted wealth.

A few points, number one, the Wisdom of Solomon is saying here that wealth when compared to wisdom is worthless. The Greek word for wisdom here is *sofía*, the name Sophia comes from that. The Greek word *philosophy* literally means a friend of wisdom. *Fílos* means friend, *sofía* means wisdom. So *sofía*, that pursuit of wisdom, the acquisition of wisdom is incomparably greater than wealth, which is interesting because if you look at the passage, how many of us human beings pour ourselves, pour out our lives in order to acquire scepters, thrones, wealth, priceless gems, gold, silver, health, beauty? I mean these are the things that people give all of their efforts, give all of their energies to getting, right. Not just money, not just gold and silver, but positions of power, positions of fame, physical beauty, physical health. How much money do people spend? How much time do human beings

spend on the acquisition of health, beauty, silver, gold, wealth, power, possessions, all of these things. And yet, what the Wisdom of Solomon is saying to us here is that all of that is like sand. It's worthless compared to *sofia*. It's worthless compared to divine wisdom. It's worthless compared to the spiritual wealth of pursuing lady wisdom, of making her your friend, of loving her more than anything else in the world. It's a feminization, it's a feminine image of wisdom.

Which by the way, it's interesting too because when you say the word philosophy, a lot of people think the most boring topic possible, like that's the kind of connotation people often have with philosophy. But philosophy really means the love of wisdom, friendship with wisdom. In that sense, it's the most important thing you can do is to pursue knowledge, to pursue wisdom above all of the other good things of the earth. In fact, Wisdom of Solomon is saying here that when I made wisdom first, when I put her first, all the other good things came to me along with her, and in her hands was uncounted wealth. What kind of wealth? Spiritual wealth. There's your link between the Old Testament and the New Testament, because what Jesus says to the rich young man is this, he says if you keep the commandments, give away what you have and you come and follow me, you will have treasure, but not treasure on Earth, you will have treasure in heaven, right. Spiritual wealth, spiritual treasure, a treasure that's not going to go away, a treasure that moths are not going to consume, that thieves are not going to steal, that illness is not going to take away from you. That's what wisdom is, that's the wisdom of the kingdom of God.

So with that in mind then, if we look at the Psalms, and as you're turning there too just one last point. Notice that sometimes people also say things like, well the first books of philosophy are Plato or, you know, Aristotle. There's some truth to that, but the reality is Judaism already had a philosophical tradition. The philosophical tradition within Judaism is in the Book of Proverbs, it's the Wisdom of Solomon, it's the Book of Sirach. The wisdom literature of the Old Testament, like the Wisdom of Solomon, is the philosophical literature of the Bible, right, and it's one of the reasons we would do well to spend more time reading from those books because there is true wisdom and true philosophy to be gained from them. In any case, Psalm 90:12, I'll just highlight one verse here, it's a beautiful Psalm but it says these words:

So teach us to number our days
that we may get a heart of wisdom.

So there the church places on our lips in the Responsorial Psalm a prayer that responds to the readings we've seen, a prayer asking God to give us a heart of wisdom, to give us wills that are ordered toward wisdom, to give us wills that are in love with the truth, that are in love with wisdom, that are in love with learning the faith. And I think that's really important for us in our day and time because we live in a climate, believe it or not, of a kind of anti-intellectualism. I mean I already brought up the fact that for a lot of people philosophy is synonymous with boredom. They think that it is a boring endeavor. Well that's just false and it's frankly a lie, it's deceptive, because we were made to know the truth. That's why God gives us an intellect, and to the extent that we love the truth we also grow in love of God, because God is truth itself. So at the same time as I'm saying that though, how many Christians in our day and time pray for wisdom? How many of us actually get on our knees and ask God to give me wisdom, give me understanding, make me fall in love with your word, make me fall in love with your truth, give me the grace to love the Catechism, to love the Bible, to love the teachings of the Popes, to love the wisdom of the saints. I want to make that a part of my life, I want to make that a treasure in my life. I want to put it at the center my life. I want to pursue it, I want to fall in love with it. How many of us ask for that gift? And at the same time, how many of us ask for all the material things that the Wisdom of Solomon just listed? Health, wealth, beauty, physical, material blessing. How many of our prayers are focused on material blessing and how many of them are focused on the spiritual blessing of wisdom? Something to think about, something to pray about. I think the readings for this week really challenge us along those lines to make that prayer central in our lives.

In closing then, I'd just like to end with two elements here from the living tradition that I think are worth highlighting because of the difficulties raised by the gospel for this week. The first aspect of the living tradition I'd like to highlight just regards the whole question of the eye of the needle. Some of you may have heard this before and I just want to bring it to your attention. There is a tradition of, in a sense, softening the image of the eye of the needle that goes back at least as far as

the time of Ambrose in the Fourth century A.D. St. Thomas Aquinas carries this over and it makes its way into what is called the *Glossa Ordinaria*, meaning the common gloss or the common commentary on the Scriptures. The *Glossa Ordinaria* was a series of marginal notes in medieval Bibles that would tell you how the text had been interpreted, and when it comes to this particular verse about a camel and the eye of the needle, it's interesting. St. Thomas Aquinas quotes St. Ambrose as saying this:

[A]t Jerusalem there was a certain gate, called, 'The needle's eye', through which a camel could not pass, but on its bended knees, and after its burden had been taken off; and so the rich should not be able to pass along the narrow way that leads to life, till he had put off the burden of sin, and of riches, that is, by ceasing to love them.²

So what's interesting about that quotation is two things. First, I had heard it before but I didn't realize that it went all the way back to St. Ambrose. I didn't realize that it was a medieval and even a patristic tradition. So if you ever wondered where did that come from, that's where that comes from. At the same time however I would point out that, at least in my studies, I've not found any evidence of there ever having been a gate in Jerusalem that was actually called the eye of the needle about which this was the case. I can't find that in any ancient Jewish sources or any First Century sources, and so there is some debate about whether that patristic and medieval tradition of interpreting the eye of the needle as a name for a gate is accurate, or whether Jesus actually means the image of the camel and the eye's needle to be taken as saying it is impossible for a person who trusts in riches to make it in the kingdom of heaven, but that only with God's grace can it be accomplished. So those are kind of two of the traditions that are dominant in the history of the church and I just want to let you know about that, and just point out that whichever one of those traditions you take, whether you take the more radical interpretation that he is really saying it's impossible for someone with wealth to enter into the kingdom of heaven apart from grace, or whether you take a slightly mitigated interpretation where Jesus is using the analogy as an image for the camel having to divest itself of possessions to make it through a small gate, either way

² Attributed to Anselm; quoted in Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea* on Matt 19:26

you interpret the text, at the heart of the tradition there is the necessity of being detached from our possessions and of being willing to give up our possessions in order to follow Jesus on the path to life. That's the first element from the living tradition.

The second element I'd like to highlight revolves around Jesus' response to the young man when he says "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone." Given the fact that we live in a time where lots of people deny the divinity of Jesus and use Mark 10 to do so, I think it's at least worth noting that for centuries the church fathers and doctors have recognized that Jesus isn't denying his divinity in this passage but he's actually inviting the young man into the mystery of his divinity. So for example, St. John Chrysostom, one my favorite saints, says this:

When he [Jesus] says, "No one is good," *he does not say this to show that he is not good; far from it.* For he does not say, "Why do you call me good? I am not good" but "No one is good," that is, no human being.³

In other words, he's trying to get the young man to recognize the mystery of divinity that's implicit in him addressing Jesus as good teacher. That's St. John Chrysostom, that's in the Fourth Century in his homilies on the Gospel of Matthew. Same thing, Ambrose of Milan says this:

The Lord, then, does not deny His goodness... For when the scribe said, "Good Master," the Lord answered, "Why do you call me good?"⁴

That's Ambrose's *Exposition of the Christian Faith*. Again, I think it's really important because if you look at the gospels, you'll notice Jesus does this all the time. He doesn't shove the truth of his identity down our throats. He doesn't force his divine identity and the mystery of his divinity upon us. He always asks questions because he wants us to come to faith, he wants us to come to trust him. The same thing is true with the young man. He wants him to make the choice to be

³ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Matthew*, 63.1

⁴ Ambrose, *Exposition of the Christian Faith*, 2.1.19

his disciple and to accept him as his Lord, as his Savior, as the one good God who now has become man. And, at the end of the day that's ultimately the only reason we would ever give up everything and follow Jesus. It is because he's not some mere mortal, he's not just a human being, he is in fact the one God, the God of the Shema, who has become man, and become incarnate, and lived among us as our Savior and as our Messiah.