Spirituality
Scripture for Life

by Angie O'Gorman

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

October 30, 2016
Share on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

There is an atmosphere in two of today's readings that Catholic blogger Todd Flowerday calls "an interlude of mercy" (**https://catholicsensibility.wordpress.com/2014/08/17/reconciliation-lectionary-wisdom**). The phrase well captures a sense of God's patience with us sinners as we figure out how to respond to love. This interlude is the time between transgression and awareness, when God invites us forward into life; it is so much more powerful than anger or violence.

If nothing else in these readings touches us, that particular dynamic — that interlude of mercy in the face of our error and sin, that space in which to face ourselves free of external judgement and condemnation — offers wisdom on how we might act when we are confronted by the error and sin of others.

Our reading from Wisdom is particularly rich in this respect as it encourages Jewish immigrants in Alexandria, Egypt, to remain faithful to their teachings and traditions even while they are surrounded by radically different beliefs: culture clash at is most virulent. We have a sense of the disorientation and pain this kind of clash can cause as we hear the pros and cons of our own immigration debate year after year. Those who work with immigrants and refugees know how difficult it is to balance keeping one's culture and beliefs while also facing the need to enculturate to new surroundings.

Written for immigrants with strong traditions and beliefs, Wisdom as a whole provides great insight in this area, wisdom that still holds today: The best place to start is the common ground between the immigrating and receiving communities.

Our reading from 2 Thessalonians provides an interesting challenge to the various understandings of scripture as the inspired word of God. Many scholars doubt that this book was written by Paul, while the general consensus is that he did write 1 Thessalonians; and 2 Thessalonians absolutely contradicts Paul on one very important point: Are we already living in the Parousia?

And finally, we get to the hero of today's Gospel reading from Luke: Zacchaeus — ever the surprise. See what you think about the possibility that, in this story, the Lord sought to save not Zacchaeus, but the people who wanted to condemn him.

We receive scripture in part to apply it to our own day and time. Through it we can glean the wisdom of the ages. In it we find our faith ancestors in some of the same quandaries that we are in, with some of the same questions that we have. We can't simply transpose scripture to our own setting — the error made by the author in 2 Thessalonians — but once it has been interpreted for our place and time, it offers immense human help.

Somehow this seems miraculous to me. That the human element, though it has changed in so many ways down the ages, has an underlying constancy. That our own needs, personal and communal, have been faced and responded to in the past, and that we gain wisdom from those responses that can be helpful today. This all seems so obvious on one hand, yet on the other, it is something we often fail to value, fail to make use of except on Sundays.

Thank God for the interludes of mercy when, for whatever reason, we once again know God, who waits patiently for us to awaken to what the Divine holds out to us.

WISDOM 11:22–12:2

Alexandria, Egypt, is only 300 miles from Jerusalem. Within 100 years of its founding in 331 B.C.E., it emerged as a key Jewish center. By the first century C.E., synagogues could be found across the city. Though they give varying dates for its composition, scholars generally place the Book of Wisdom, also known as the Wisdom of Solomon, as having been written sometime between 200-50 B.C.E. by an Alexandrian Jew. It offers support and guidance to Alexandria's Jewish communities

struggling to remain faithful to their Jewish identity in the midst of the counter-demands of the surrounding Hellenistic culture.

Wedged between two worlds — their own strict Mosaic Law and traditions, and the Hellenistic values of the Greeks — Israelites were beginning to fall into apostasy. Hellenistic culture was alluring. The attitudes of different Ptolemaic kings toward the presence of Jews were threatening. The Jews' need to blend in while maintaining their own identity made for a disorienting, and sometimes dangerous, clash of both culture and belief.

The Jews, for example, saw the source of immorality as the person endowed with free will. For the Greeks, it was the gods themselves; the person was a pawn of the gods. Judaism held out the possibility of living a moral life. Hellenistic common wisdom offered no such possibility: It was fatalistic. Jewish belief held that the cosmos was a creation of God, and hence it was good. Greeks saw the universe divided into spirit (good) and matter (evil). This duality was basic to everything else.

A justification of Jewish life was needed, and it had to be explained in terms that made sense within the context of Greek culture. The Book of Wisdom was intended to encourage, reassure and revitalize the Jewish people by restating the case for Hebrew wisdom and its activity in the history of the Jewish people (see Jose Vilchez, "Wisdom," in The International Bible Commentary, The Liturgical Press: 1998).

Wisdom, of course, was also the ultimate virtue in Greek culture. And so the author sees and shows wisdom as a common value, the beginning of common ground.

Today's Wisdom reading reminds the Alexandrian Jewish community that their Lord is Lord of the whole universe and has mercy on all. On all. Their Lord overlooks people's sins so that they may repent, loves all things that are and loathes nothing that has been created, including the Greeks, apparently. A hard, hard lesson indeed.

The author is accomplishing two things: reminding the Jewish community of God's unquenchable love for them; and, standing firmly on that foundation, suggesting God's unquenchable love for the Greeks, in whom the same imperishable spirit lives as it does in the Jews.

And how does Yahweh rebuke sinners? Little by little. Yes, the Lord warns them, and reminds them of the sins they are committing, but also overlooks sins for the sake of repentance. Why? So they may abandon their wickedness and believe in the Lord. It is up to them to heed, or not.

God, says some translations, chastises the immoral with patience. What does this mean? It means that God is patient — or that God uses patience itself as a way to chastise. Both are mercies. Holy patience itself draws forth our repentance.

2 THESSALONIANS 1:11–2:2

For such a short letter, 2 Thessalonians presents a number of problems. Scholars increasingly take it to be a pseudonymous letter, one not written by Paul but by an unknown author writing at a later time. This practice wasn't uncommon. It was how a disciple offered an appropriate interpretation, or application of a text for a new time. In this particular instance, however, the author of 2 Thessalonians wrote something that contradicts what Paul said in an earlier letter.

Neither the date nor the place of 2 Thessalonians' writing is known. Neither is its audience. From the letter as a whole, it seems the recipients were members of a severely persecuted community sometime between the death of Paul, ca. 62 C.E., and about 110 C.E., when it is referred to in other writings.

The letter was written to correct the idea that the day of the Lord, the Parousia, had already arrived. The author suggests that the error was created by a prophetic utterance in the community ("by a 'spirit' "), by some other teaching ("by an oral statement") or by "a letter allegedly from us" (2:2). Following today's reading, the letter gives a timetable of observable events that were to occur and signal the coming Parousia. There is a problem here, however, in that Paul, the author of 1 Thessalonians, described a Parousia that would come so suddenly it would be entirely unpredictable (1 Thessalonians 5:1-3).

LUKE 19:1-10

Only Luke tells the story of Zacchaeus, and he tells it at the end of a multi-chapter narrative describing Jesus' journey from Galilee to Jerusalem. The journey is replete with stories of Jesus seeking out and saving the lost. But who, in the story of Zacchaeus, is Jesus seeking? Who is lost?

Our familiarity with this story may lead us to say, "Zacchaeus, of course." We know Zacchaeus was a tax collector, and we know tax collectors were recruited from the Jewish community because it was less risky for the Roman occupiers to have Jewish locals collect the taxes charged for the occupation of their homeland. Luke identifies

Zacchaeus as a “chief tax collector” (v. 2). He tells us Zacchaeus was wealthy, and we can guess why. Tax collectors defrauding the populace was an ongoing issue for the community of Jesus’ time (Luke 3:13). Zacchaeus would have been a man well known in Jericho, and well hated.

And yet, for Luke, tax collectors, loathed as they were, were among the marginalized who were attracted to Jesus. They were among the lost whom Jesus came to seek and save. But there is still the problem of ill-gotten wealth here, which is viewed with suspicion in all the Gospels.

The name Zacchaeus means “righteous” or “pure.” And he was short. That is how he ended up in a sycamore tree. On **https://greattreasures.org**, where those of us who don’t read Greek can gain a bit of background, we learn that the Greek word for “short,” when used in the superlative as it is here, can be translated as “least.” That is how it is used in Luke 9:48: “for the *least* among all of you is the greatest.”

And then there is Zacchaeus’ claim: “Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded any one of anything, I restore it fourfold” (v. 8, English Standard Version). This is said in the present tense, as it was in the original Greek, not the future tense, as some translations suggest. Zacchaeus resolves the issue of his wealth by saying he is already giving half of his possessions to the poor and paying back those he has defrauded four times what he has taken.

Some commentators interpret the present tense here as a “futuristic present.” Zacchaeus repents and vows that henceforth, he’ll make restitution. Still others interpret the verbs as a “progressive present tense,” something ongoing. But it is interesting to note that Zacchaeus’ claim is no different grammatically from what the Pharisee said in his prayer in last Sunday’s Gospel: “I fast twice per Sabbath, I tithe everything that I possess” (Luke 18:12, see **https://greattreasures.org**).

If we use the first interpretation, Zacchaeus is a decent man about whom people have made all kinds of false assumptions. This interpretation fits with many such twists where Jesus calls out good people who are bad and commends bad people who are good — the faith of a Roman soldier, a good Samaritan, a Samaritan leper who was the only person to give thanks for his healing, and a tax collector (!) who was commended as more righteous than a sanctimonious Pharisee.

The Rev. Dr. Elizabeth Kaeton, an Episcopal priest, is quoted as suggesting, “The despicable Zacchaeus is the generous one. The traditional interpretation that

Zacchaeus is a sinner whose conversion tricks us into committing the very sin that the story condemns." "Turns out," Kaeton writes, "Zacchaeus does live up to his name. He is, in fact, 'the righteous one.' Turns out, Jesus knew that all along!" (quoted in "A Repentant Sinner or a Hidden Saint? The Story of Zacchaeus," posted on the website "Journey with Jesus," **www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20131028JJ.shtml**).

The crowd had demonized Zacchaeus. Jesus praises him as "a son of Abraham" (v. 9). Luke's Jesus says, "Today salvation has come to this house because this man too is a descendant of Abraham." Jesus does not define Zacchaeus as a sinner rejected by God. He may have sinned, but that does not define him. What defines him is that "he too is a descendant of Abraham."

William Loader, a minister of the Uniting Church in Australia and emeritus professor of New Testament at Murdoch University, Perth, notes, "The point within that context is that Zacchaeus is not a nobody. He is also a human being — in that context, a child of Abraham, 'one of us Jews.' Among his people Jesus would write no one off. … This is not unlike what Jesus tells his disciples to do in Luke 10: "turn up on their doorstep for a meal and see what happens!" ("First Thoughts on Year C Gospel Passages from the Lectionary: Pentecost 24," at **http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/LkPentecost24.htm**).

Planning: 31st Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)

By: Lawrence Mick

In his encyclical on the environment, *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis quotes twice from today's first reading, from Wisdom verses 11:24 and 26: "For you love all things that exist, and detest none of the things that you have made; for you would not have made anything if you had hated it" and "For they are yours, O Lord, who love the living" (see *Laudato Si'* #77 and 89. It's a different translation than our Lectionary text.)

He might well have also quoted from Wisdom: "But you have mercy on all, because you can do all things; and you overlook sins for the sake of repentance." (11:23) The Holy Father stresses in the encyclical that it is not too late to address the critical issue of climate change and that God is a merciful God who will forgive our past sins.

But he also stresses the urgent need to take significant action now to avoid much greater disasters than we are already experiencing.

This reading certainly gives a solid basis to address ecological issues in light of the coming election. There are many issues we need to consider when voting, but it is hard to think of one more important than this one, since it affects everyone currently alive on earth and generations still to come. It is the ultimate pro-life issue of our time. All life on earth depends on a healthy environment, and millions will die if we do not change our ways. Like Zacchaeus, we are called to repent and reorient our lives. As planners and preachers, we are called to do as Wisdom says God does: “Therefore you rebuke offenders little by little, warn them and remind them of the sins they are committing, that they may abandon their wickedness and believe in you, O Lord!” (12:2)

All Saints and All Souls: Tuesday is the Solemnity of All Saints, a holy day of obligation. Many Catholics today reject any idea of obligation for holy days, so it behooves parish leaders to encourage people to gather and then to provide a joyful experience that might prompt them to come again.

Readings for All Souls’ Day are taken from #668 in the Lectionary or from those provided for Masses for the Dead in #1011-1016 (in Volume IV). Those who are preaching should have the main voice in this decision, but they can consult with planners and perhaps with bereavement ministers to discern which texts might speak most helpfully to parishioners. Be sure to let all the lectors and musicians know well in advance what texts to prepare.

Daylight Saving Time Ends: Next Sunday marks the return to standard time in most areas of the United States. Announcing it at the end of Mass this weekend may be a gift that allows people an extra hour of sleep next Sunday morning.

Prayers: 31st Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)

By: Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

God’s mercy calls us to repentance. When we judge others for their behavior, no matter how unsavory it is, we need to remember that God’s mercy is not just available to us — it’s there for all people. Surprising things happened to Zacchaeus,

the maligned tax collector who looked for Jesus. God's mercy is so much bigger than ours.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you acknowledged Zacchaeus, who repented in your presence: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you brought salvation to the house of a sinner: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you call us to be open to mercy for ourselves and others: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider: My friends, we pray for all people throughout the world, that they may experience God's surprising mercy.

Minister: For the church and for members of all faith traditions who hope for God's mercy … we pray,

- For an attitude of mercy toward those we judge to be sinners or slackers or unworthy of mercy for whatever reason … we pray,
- For those who refuse to show mercy toward others, and for the ability to recognize our own need for mercy and forgiveness … we pray,
- For healing the divisions in our country … we pray,
- For the poor and disenfranchised; and for those who judge them as unworthy of public assistance … we pray,
- For our national election: that the outcomes may reflect a concern for the common good … we pray,
- For peace, and for those who perceive violence and war as God's punishment toward others … we pray,
- For the sick and the dying, the grieving and the discouraged among us; and for those who have died … *(names)* … we pray,

Presider: God of surprises, we are grateful for the many times you have shown mercy to us imperfect people. Remove judgment toward others from our hearts and grant us the capacity to see all people through your merciful eyes. We pray in the name of Jesus, who called everyone to repentance. Amen.

This story appears in the **Cycle C Sunday Resources** feature series. View the full series.