

Ordinary Time 28

Wisdom is the ability to make right judgments and right choices about things, to understand what is of ultimate value and what is only of passing value. Wisdom is the unifying theme of today's scripture readings.

There is an enduring popularity to the film "It's a Wonderful Life". What is it about this movie? The story is about George Bailey and his nemesis Mr. Potter. Bailey receives the wisdom to make the right choices in spite of the immediate cost to himself. George is going for the treasure in heaven. Interestingly, in the movie this wisdom of George's, which he is often tempted to give up, is shown to be inextricably connected to the Divine wisdom revealed in his Word, as our second reading today from Hebrews affirms: the Word of God is "living and effective...able to discern reflections and the thoughts of the heart...".

In today's Gospel we hear of the encounter between Jesus and a certain young man. This encounter is one of the most intriguing in the Gospels. The man asks Jesus "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus answers the young man's question with a question: "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone." Jesus is pointing to the source of eternal life and hinting at his own divine nature.

What is it that he is seeing in Jesus? What is it that is more than what the young man already has? He is respectable and, it late turns out, wealthy. But, there is something missing. Jesus is like a surgeon who has put his finger on what it is that keeps this man from allowing God to be his all in all. Eternal life is the natural inheritance of those who call God "Father". Jesus tells him to "sell what you have, give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven; then, come follow me." Notice that when Jesus speaks of treasures in heaven, he is not referring to after death. When Jesus is speaking with his disciples. These heavenly treasures are both here and now as well as eternal. In the dramatic climax of "It's a Wonderful Life", George comes to see the treasures he has received in return for those he gave up.

So, wisdom is about choosing between treasures. What are treasures that compete with heavenly treasure? Yes, possessions, status, popularity with certain people, acceptance, getting ahead, and sometimes life itself.

Today, the Church canonizes two saints who display great wisdom in their choices:

Pope Paul VI's baptismal name was Giovanni Battista (John the Baptist). He lived up to that name. He served as Pope from 1963 to 1978. Pope Paul oversaw most of the Second Vatican Council and its immediate implementation. He wrote a short and powerful teaching "Humanae Vitae" about human sexuality and the divine wisdom. His teaching, which was published 50 years ago in 1968, was widely attacked for his daring to defend Christian values against the so-called "New Morality of the Sexual Revolution". He chose truthfulness over popularity.

St. Oscar, was the archbishop of San Salvador. In 1980 he publicly denounced political groups who were engaging in political assassinations in El Salvador at that time. He himself was assassinated while celebrating Mass. He chose faithful witness over his personal safety.

Inheriting eternal life begins now with the choosing the treasures of the Kingdom of God over all the competing treasures.