Wisdom and the True Purpose of Life

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The story of King Solomon fascinated people in ancient times and stories of his wisdom led to the accumulation of considerable literature under his aegis. Even today newspaper columnists speak of politicians and judges needing "Solomonic wisdom." This wisdom was acknowledged to be a divine gift so that Solomon could govern the people of Israel effectively (1 Kg 3:5-14). The "Book of Wisdom" attributed to Solomon was composed in Greek during the first century B.C. It seems to be addressed to Jews of Alexandria, whose familiarity with Greek philosophy and culture may have constituted a temptation to assimilate -- and even to abandon their faith. The author reflected at length on these issues (1:1-5:23) and then exhorted his listeners (readers) to seek wisdom as the key to happiness in the service of God (6:1-21). Solomon's cultivation of the spiritual gift called wisdom then became the topic of a prolonged reflection (6:22-10:21). The selection for this Sunday points out the severe limitations under which mere mortals try to puzzle over the secrets of the universe. Even those in our day who are confident that science will be able to unravel the mysteries of the physical universe cannot apply their instruments to the ultimate purpose of creation. "For what person knows God's counsel, or who can conceive what the Lord intends?" (Wis 9:13). We need the gift of wisdom, the guidance of God's Holy Spirit to find the path to true and lasting happiness (see 9:17-18).

It is commonplace to consider life as a journey, but the biblical image is a pilgrimage, which means progress of people within a community toward a sacred goal. St. Luke described the movement of Jesus and his disciples toward Jerusalem as a pilgrimage (9:51) that attracted a great number of followers. Jesus explained that to accompany him would demand a lifelong commitment and progressive death to self in order to foster a richer experience of life. While on pilgrimage people set aside the relationships of family life, so Jesus stressed the need for allegiance to the kingdom of God above all human attachments. As Jesus' teachings made him a "sign of contradiction" (see Luke 2:34), there could well be tensions within families. Of course, in later times entire groups would be Christian and if there is no opposition to whole-hearted obedience to the Gospel, then the family is an ideal setting for the Christian life. Luke had emphasized already the call to deny self and to take up one's cross daily (9:23), a challenge whose meaning would become clear only in the light of the Paschal Mystery. The death-and-resurrection of Jesus would manifest depths of divine wisdom and release God's Spirit upon the world in a new way.

Two parables illustrate the serious preparation required for one to become a disciple of Jesus. In daily life people wish to succeed in all that they set out to accomplish. Ambition and greed so often lead to failures that occasion not only ridicule by others but also personal disaster. Mistakes in military matters by leaders of nations invariably cause death and devastation for many, so Jesus' common-sense suggestion of peaceful negotiation is part of the Gospel's call to overcome violence.
The final challenge does not seem to follow from the parables. "In the same way, every one of you who does not renounce all his possessions cannot be my disciple" (14:33). However, the examples from daily life are intended only to make listeners think about the serious consequences of their decisions. If human relationships may become an obstacle to the true service of God, then even more so would attachment to possessions lead to compromise. The person who comes to recognize that Jesus is the Wisdom of God will give up all else to follow him. Thus one moves beyond the definition of happiness in worldly terms to the acceptance of the paradox constituted by the life and teaching of Jesus. Answering his call seems to be a risky venture, but it becomes a new understanding of the divine wisdom that imbues all creation. Life is thus a pilgrimage in the company of the Master who guides his people toward happiness in union with God the Father.