

**Fr. Keith W. Boisvert**  
**14 October 2018**  
**28<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)**

- *A man consulted with his physician. “I have a terrible problem”, he said. “Lately, I’ve been carousing and misbehaving. It’s been happening more and more frequently, and my conscience is beginning to trouble me very deeply. Can you give me something that will help?” The doctor replied, “Oh, I see, you want me to give you something to strengthen your willpower?” “No”, the patient protested, “that’s not it. I don’t want to strengthen my willpower. I want you to give me something to weaken my conscience”.*

We laugh at that story, and it is funny. But it is probably a knowing laugh, because this story reveals our own desire to take the low road rather than the high road, and our preference not to be challenged too much in life. The scripture readings we heard today started with these two sentences from the Book of Wisdom: *“I prayed, and prudence was given me; I pleaded, and the spirit of wisdom came to me. I preferred her to scepter and throne; and deemed riches nothing in comparison with her...”*

These words extol the value of wisdom and being a wise person. I don’t think we live in a culture which holds up “wisdom” as valuable, or something to be sought after very much. I once spent seven years as chaplain on a college campus. There were many classes and much learning of facts; and some students occasionally “turned on” about a particular subject area. But I saw little evidence that learning in and of itself was considered valuable, and rarely heard a student having a goal to become a “wise” person. Some students did want to serve others in their future careers, but the goal most often was to get a degree, in order to get a job, in order to make money. Wisdom is, therefore, something which we must learn to value ourselves, and then pursue with our whole being.

One of scripture’s functions is to show us ways to be wise, and in the four gospels we learn from the way Jesus lived his life how to be wise. So, what is this way of Jesus? Among other things, I think it is the way of wisdom... the way of pondering. The way of Jesus is the way of standing amid all the delight, and joy, and contradiction, and ambiguity, and division, and complexity of

life with a heart and a faith big enough to somehow hold it all, and to embrace it all. Jesus' way of wisdom is the way of holding many different things and experiences at the same time.

Part of this can be understood by looking at its opposite. The opposite of the way of wisdom, the way of holding things, scripture tells us, is the way of "amazement." Time and time again, the crowds following Jesus are described as being "amazed" at what he says and does. Always they are chided for it: "Don't be amazed!" Jesus says. Amazement is not what Jesus wants and it is most often not something that does us good as adults.

Amazement can be good, if it is the amazement of a child where amazement is wonder: a stunning of the intellect into silence, and a sense of its own limits. That is good, but not normally the experience of amazement for adults. For us, amazement is more often not wonder, but rather cheerleading, and sometimes we wind up hating what formerly amazed us. The same people who were amazed at Jesus and who tried to make him "King" would, not long afterwards, shout: "*Crucify him! Crucify him!*" In our own time, this is something political leaders sometimes experience. A superficial amazement is the opposite of wisdom.

What, then, is wisdom? I think at the heart of wisdom is a sense of pondering and a sense of helplessness. You will, perhaps, think that strange, but let me explain. We see an example of this in Mary, Jesus' mother. She is never described as being amazed. When others are amazed she goes off and instead, silently, ponders things in her heart. This is also true of the disciples of Jesus, though only on occasion. Normally, like the crowds, they are amazed and need some prodding—which Jesus often provides. But one example of wisdom happens after Jesus' exchange with the rich young man in the gospel today. Jesus asks him to give up everything and follow him, but the young man is unable to do so. He goes away sad, and Jesus then turns to his disciples and says: "*I tell you that it is harder for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle.*" How do the disciples react?

They are not amazed. There are no wows, no cheerleading, no congratulating Jesus on how wonderful he is. They are, instead, stunned: "*If that is the case, then who can be saved?*" Paraphrased, that might read: "*If that is the case, then we are all in deep trouble!*" Jesus' answer brings them face to face with their own helplessness, their poverty, their limits, and to the searing realization that they do not really have things figured out as they think they have. And that paralysis is good since it forces them to wonder, to again take on the helplessness of the child.

When we are amazed, we are not wise and we hold nothing together. In amazement, we fall prey to every kind of superficiality, novelty, trick, and one-sided ideology. Amazement is the unrecognized face of fundamentalism, which is the antithesis of wisdom. The way of amazement is the way of fundamentalism, the way of letting one piece, or person, be the whole.

And the way of amazement is everywhere: We look at our sports heroes, our rock stars, and even our politicians and we say: “*Wow. Be my King! Be my Queen!*” We take a first course in something (psychology, theology, liturgy, adult education, feminism, ecology... whatever) and emerge from that initial classroom starry-eyed, newly angry at the world, devoid of compassion; in brief, amazed. We begin then to crucify a whole lot of people and things. This also happens when we hear a report of news, but don’t have all the background facts and history, or don’t really understand the whole picture. Small wonder, the poet, Alexander Pope, once suggested “*a little learning is a dangerous thing.*” It too easily leads to the way of amazement.

The way of wisdom is the way of pondering, the way of holding every kind of pain, suffering, delight, and contradiction long enough until it actually transforms you, and gestates compassion within you, and bring you to your knees in a thousand surrenders. You and I are wise, and we walk the way of Jesus, when we are so stunned by it all that, in wonder, we ask: “If that is the case, then who can be saved?”

“*No*”, the patient protested, “*that’s not it. I don’t want to strengthen my willpower. I want you to give me something to weaken my conscience*”. Like the rich man of the gospel, we hold the key. The Holy Spirit already dwelling within us can lead us into a true gospel perspective about living. Wisdom can lead us into seeing ourselves and how we act and what makes us tick more clearly. If we do not undertake this spiritual journey, we will be held accountable by the God who has already given us the key. In the words of the second reading: “*...everything is naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must render an account.*”