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# The Meaning of Christian Wisdom

## Biblical Reflection for 25th Sunday in Ordinary Time B

By Father Thomas Rosica, CSB

TORONTO, SEPT. 16, 2009 ([Zenit.org](http://zenit.org)).- The picture of the righteous one in today's first reading from the Book of Wisdom is based on the fourth Servant Song [Isaiah 52:13-53:12], as well as on Isaiah 42:1 and Psalm 22:8. Though the Book of Wisdom book was not accepted into the canon by the rabbis of Palestine, nonetheless it seems to have influenced the writers of the New Testament, especially in their portrait of Jesus, the righteous one who was unjustly condemned.

The haunting description of the wicked who lie in wait for the righteous in today's first reading (Wisdom 2:12 and 17-20) leaves the hearers shocked. The thoughts and actions of the wicked are cold and calculated: "Let us see if his words are true, and let us test what will happen at the end of his life; for if the righteous man is God's child, he will help him, and will deliver him from the hand of his adversaries. Let us test him with insult and torture, so that we may find out how gentle he is, and make trial of his forbearance. Let us condemn him to a shameful death, for, according to what he says, he will be protected" (2:17-20).

The righteous one is attacked because his lifestyle is a condemnation of the wicked: "He reproaches us for sins against the law" (2:12). The righteous one's fidelity is vindicated. He does not die because he shares community with God. The righteous person is characterized by gentleness and patience, is tested, persecuted and even killed by the self-confident wicked. They resolve to persecute the righteous one because his life and words are a reproach to them (2:12-16), and they determine to test the claims of the righteous one (17-20). The wicked invite death by their evil deeds.

Who is wise among you?

The question introduced at the beginning the Letter of James 3 frames the entire discussion: "Who is wise and understanding among you?" In other words, how is wisdom perceived? James (3:13-4:3) addresses the symptoms of wisdom, both godly wisdom and another kind of wisdom, which is "earthly, unspiritual, devilish" (3:15). With 4:4, James spells out a sharp dichotomy between the wise and the unwise, characterizing the wise person as one who is an enemy of the world and the unwise as one who is "an enemy of God" (4:4). "Real wisdom is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy" [3:17].

The assigning of various vices and virtues to differing wisdoms becomes more intense in 4:1-3, where the author introduces questions of internal conflict with one another. When motives and behaviors are in conflict with one another, they provide another clue that wisdom is absent. The author of James defines wisdom as being docile, lenient, and peaceful. All of these are qualities of children, yet James and the Wisdom literature of the Bible also recognize these as mature adult qualities. Without such qualities, the person turns into a monster guilty of conflicts, disputes, wars, murder, envy, quarreling and fights. Such people squander what they receive on their own pleasures. True Christian wisdom is dedicated to others; jealousy and strife are

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self-centered. This passage makes it clear that we should imitate wisdom rather than fame and wealth.

### Ingredients

Today's Gospel passage (Mark 9:30-37) is the second of the Passion predictions of Jesus in Mark's Gospel. Jesus' announcement of his passion and death leaves the disciples without words. In the meantime, they argue who was the most important among them. We find the same pattern as in last week's Gospel -- the prediction, misunderstanding, and instruction on the nature of discipleship.

For Mark, these scenes contain all the ingredients of Christian wisdom. Like the other predictions, today's passage is followed by a series of sayings on discipleship (9:30-37). In this brief discussion with Jesus, three features of the disciples are revealed.

First, even after failure, the disciples are singled out for special instruction. The immediate preceding incident details the inability of the disciples to help the father and his son who was troubled with an unclean spirit (9:14-29). Jesus scolds them harshly, since their failure has led to another confrontation with the scribes: "How much longer must I put up with you?" (9:19). Yet the weakness of the disciples has not diminished his zeal to prepare them for life in the Kingdom of God.

Second, the disciples find Jesus' message baffling. This is the second time that Jesus predicts his destiny in Jerusalem, yet the disciples fail to understand and are so intimidated that they will not even ask any questions (9:32). When Jesus asks them what they are arguing about on the road, they were so embarrassed that they had nothing to say. They may not have understood much but they knew enough that their argument was completely out of order. They are baffled and humiliated. But Jesus has not given up on them yet.

The third thing that happens to the disciples is that they learn a profound lesson about what it means to be servant. When Mark uses the word "servant" in today's Gospel, he is using the Greek word which also means deacon. This word is first used of the waiters who serve the water-made-wine at the wedding feast at Cana (John 2:5,9). Matthew uses it for the king's servants in the parable of the marriage feast (Matthew 22:13). St. Paul describes himself as a servant of the Gospel (Colossians 1:23; Ephesians 3:7), servant of the Church (Colossians 1:25), servant of the new covenant in the Spirit (2 Corinthians 6:4). John uses it of Jesus' adherents in general; they are his "deacons," his servants (John 12:26).

Jesus tells us that he himself did not come on earth to be served; he came to serve [Mt 20:28; Mk 10:45]. The previous words on cross-bearing and losing one's life (8:34-38) are given added meaning and specificity when Jesus speaks of being last of all and servant of all (9:35).

### Greatness redefined

The whole notion of greatness is redefined for the disciples. New categories are established for determining success and failure, winning and losing, achievement and unfulfillment. At this point Jesus introduces the child into their midst. It is not the child's naïveté or innocence, trustfulness or playfulness that is highlighted here, but the child's lowly status, as one always under the authority of another and without rights. Jesus forges a new system of relationships: welcome the little child in my name and you welcome me; welcome me and you are welcoming no less than God himself. A communion of hospitality is established between the little child, Jesus, and God.

The child is an apt symbol for powerlessness and total reliance on others. Mark teaches us to welcome the powerless and the disenfranchised. Through this gesture, Jesus illustrates the qualities of the little child within each of us. Jesus possessed the child within in himself and he expects nothing less than these childlike qualities from his disciples.

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The disciples become mirrors in which we see ourselves all too clearly. Their failures, their inability to understand typify the patterns of future generations of disciples like us who are also slow to understand the radical message of Jesus.

### Wisdom and virtue

One of the profound, universal lessons about acquiring true wisdom was taught by the Servant of God Pope John Paul II during his historic address to the General Assembly of the United Nations in New York City on Oct. 5, 1995. Those words still ring in my heart and mind today. Addressing the leaders of the nations of the world, the Holy Father said:

"We must overcome our fear of the future. But we will not be able to overcome it completely unless we do so together. The 'answer' to that fear is neither coercion nor repression, nor the imposition of one social 'model' on the entire world. The answer to the fear which darkens human existence at the end of the 20th century is the common effort to build the civilization of love, founded on the universal values of peace, solidarity, justice, and liberty. And the 'soul' of the civilization of love is the culture of freedom: the freedom of individuals and the freedom of nations, lived in self-giving solidarity and responsibility.

"We must not be afraid of the future. We must not be afraid of man. It is no accident that we are here. Each and every human person has been created in the 'image and likeness' of the One who is the origin of all that is. We have within us the capacities for wisdom and virtue. With these gifts, and with the help of God's grace, we can build in the next century and the next millennium a civilization worthy of the human person, a true culture of freedom. We can and must do so! And in doing so, we shall see that the tears of this century have prepared the ground for a new springtime of the human spirit."

Let us pray that the Lord will bring to harvest the seeds of righteousness, wisdom and virtue sown in human hearts. Without these gifts, the civilization of love and the culture of freedom for which we all long will not be possible.

[The readings for the 23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time B are Wisdom 2:12, 17-20; James 3:16-4:3; and Mark 9:30-37]

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