

Homily for October 11, 2009 (28th Sunday in Ordinary Time)
Wis 7:7-11; Ps 90; Heb 4:12-13; Mark 10:17-30

“First things first” is one of the most important lessons we can learn as children. The importance of setting and having the right priorities is something that is drilled into us in many different ways:

- “No TV or playtime until your homework is done.”
- No dessert until you finish your vegetables.”

As we get older, the expressions may get a little more complex; but the ultimate message is the same:

- “You have to crawl before you can walk, and you have to walk before you can run.”
- “If it’s worth having, then it’s worth saving for.”
- “If you don’t know where you’ve been and where you are, then you can’t know where you’re going.”

It would be easy to disdain these sayings as mere clichés; but that wouldn’t do them justice. They have stood the test of time and we remember them because they also express a special kind of practical *wisdom*. They’ve been handed down from generation to generation because they work! In part, wisdom is “what works” for human beings over time; and it operates not only on the practical level but also on the spiritual level. Today’s Scripture readings provide us with some valuable lessons on how we gain wisdom; but they begin with that same fundamental lesson of childhood: “First things first.”

In Psalm 90 the author pleads with God, “Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain wisdom of heart.” To put it another way: “Help us, O Lord, to remember that we’re not you and that we won’t be on this earth forever.”

This may seem like an obvious lesson, but it’s not well-learned. We live in a world where people spend tens of billions of dollars every year on things that promise to eliminate even the appearance of growing older. Others make the opposite error. On a recent trip to visit our friars in Panama, I traveled to a mission church in small town called Torti. While there, I attended the funeral of a 19 year-old man who killed himself driving drunk.

At the end of the funeral, his mother rose to speak to the assembly. After expressing her faith in God and giving thanks to the hundreds of people who

attended, she had a special plea for all the teens and young adults. She asked them to remember how precious the gift of life was and not to take it for granted. In a kind and emotionally powerful way, she asked them to number their days aright.

Another important lesson from the word today is in our first reading. Wisdom may be gained by experience, study and other human endeavors; but it is ultimately *a gift from God*. The Book of Wisdom was written a couple of centuries before Christ, but it was fashioned by the author as a reflection of Solomon, who lived many centuries earlier.

Solomon had a real passion for wisdom. In this passage, he reflects on how he prayed and pleaded for it as one would for a lover or spouse whom one wants to be near. This passion, however, was not the invention of the author of Wisdom. It was a genuine part of Solomon's character. For your Bible homework this week, spend some time reflecting on 1 Kings 3:5-15. You will recall that when God gave a young king Solomon the opportunity to have anything in the world he wanted, Solomon chose wisdom—and he received everything else besides.

Jesus echoes this lesson in today's gospel. A righteous young man asks in all earnestness what he must do to inherit everlasting life. While loving him for his passion and desire, Jesus also had to teach him an important but painful lesson: eternal life is not ours to earn; rather it is a gift from God. There will always be *something* in us that puts us in need of God's grace. We can only embrace that grace and the gift of life that accompanies it; but when we do, then our lives cannot stay the same...and we can be rewarded in ways we couldn't have imagined.

Like the rich young man, we may even be asked to do what seems impossible. As I spend time in prayer, reading and reflecting on the word of God, which the author of Hebrews describes as "living and effective, sharper than a two-edged sword," I often feel convicted. That is, I feel "naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must render an account." Let's face it, Jesus lays out some pretty high standards of behavior; and these may go against the grain of our culture or our own self interests. They may seem so impossible to observe that I can feel frustrated or discouraged and tempted to give up trying, content to live with a certain moral or spiritual mediocrity.

But what's impossible for us, Jesus reminds us, is never impossible for God. As people of faith, experience also teaches us that God can do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. That, too, is wisdom: the wisdom of letting go and letting God, of putting first things first. +