

## HOMILY SUNDAY 28 - B

“Biblical Wisdom – let go of pride and grasp God’s word

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Sr. Therese Arcand was a Grey Nun of Métis ancestry stationed in Ile-à-la Crosse, Saskatchewan. One day she performed a service for her superior, who showed her gratitude by saying that certainly she would have a lot of jewels for her crown in heaven. Sr. Therese, somewhat nervous and trying to be humble, responded by saying, “Oh no, Mother Superior, it would be harder for a needle to go through the hole of a camel than for me to get into heaven!”

We can take to heaven, only what we give away.

Be wise; let go of dependence on wealth and false pride, and soak up the Word of God.

In 1976, during my first year of ministry as a young priest in the north, I attended a Charismatic conference in Calgary - a gathering of hundreds of laity, sisters, priests, even a bishop. At the closing liturgy, people were praising God, singing loudly, even dancing their way out. Strangely, I felt downcast and sad, for no apparent reason. That feeling persisted all the way to Edmonton where I stayed at the Grey Nun’s residence. It was still there when I awoke, posing a question to me – how could I attend an event like that conference and come away feeling the way I was?

That morning, I celebrated the Eucharist for the sisters, and the gospel was today’s gospel - the story of the rich young man. Suddenly it struck me – I am the rich young man! I had just spent a weekend with Jesus at that conference, and I had come away sad. I always thought that if someone were to meet Jesus, it would be an exhilarating experience. Yet here I was, feeling sad and downcast.

I returned home to Beauval puzzled and perplexed. This was a mystery to which I had no answer. I had let go of money through the vow of poverty; genital sex through the vow of chastity, and control through the vow of obedience. How could I be that rich young man who left the conference sad? What was the reason?

The answer came slowly, through interaction with others. I shared my dilemma with the Christian Ethics students at the La Plonge Residential High School during a class in which we studied the masks that people wear, and they identified mine as “The Messiah.” That was a clue.

Then Sr. Simard SGM gave me a booklet that described a young minister’s struggle with ministry. When he was young, Christianity was easy – just going to Church and trying not to do wrong. Then he became a seminarian trying to be perfect, and suddenly Christianity was hard. I could identify with that because for me at that moment, it was very hard. Then he discovered that it wasn’t easy, nor was it hard. Intrigued, I turned the page to find out what he had discovered, and read the words: “It was impossible!”

Suddenly all kinds of lights went on, and the liberating insight and answer to my dilemma came: I had been trying to do the impossible! I had been trying for the past year to be a Messiah; taking on myself the self-appointed task of saving and changing and healing a village full of people. No wonder I was so burdened, and felt so guilty and angry when someone casually commented to me in passing one day, “Father, you’ve been here a whole year already and nothing has changed.”

I went jogging into the bush; prayed before a tree and told Jesus that I now understood – this was his Church, not mine; these were his people, not mine. I had been trying to take his place, and to do what he had already done. Someone once said, to do the right thing for the wrong reason, is the greatest kind of treason. That was me - I had been doing my will in God’s name, not God’s will. I saw the error of my ways, asked Jesus to forgive me, and surrendered that role gladly. I was liberated – I felt free, I could have jumped over that tree. The burden of sadness was all gone – I was a new creation, and what a difference it made. The congregation even noticed it in my preaching the following Sunday.

My struggle had been with False Pride. I had given up those other things asked for by my vows, but was full of False Pride, trying to be the Messiah. Finally, I was able to let that go, accept reality as it was, let God be in charge, and start to go with the flow of grace at work in other people as well as myself, and it made all the difference.

And that is the message I want to share with you today: Be wise; let go of dependence on wealth and false pride, and soak up the Word of God.

The first reading today speaks of Wisdom as an important gift above almost everything else. How true – finally I had learned to be wise, and to let go of false pride. Richard Rohr describes spirituality as the ability to let go. Those are words of wisdom, and finally I was learning to do that in my life. I was becoming wise.

The second reading extols the power and importance of the Word of God. It highlights the self-awareness that pondering the Word of God can give us – the kind of self-awareness that leads to healing and liberation – that healing and liberation I had experienced when I became aware that I was the rich young man. That too is wisdom.

The gospel of course speaks of letting go of wealth and surrendering to God’s will. The disciples were astounded at Jesus’ teaching because wealth and prosperity were considered signs of God’s blessing. I believe it is safe to say that many television evangelists tend to think and preach that way as well. Bro. Kurt Stang OMI of the Cree Nation Oblate community in Makwa shared some quotes with me one day: “The more we own, the more we are possessed by what we own” and “We can take to heaven only what we give away.” There is deep wisdom here, wisdom that I was learning in my own life. Real spirituality is all about letting go, not trying to attain more and more, or grasping what we have.

Putting the three readings together with my experience yields a clear message: Be wise; let go of dependence on wealth and false pride, and soak up the Word of God.

When I traveled with Up With People, an International singing group promoting good will and international relations, I was billeted once with a cast member named William. He would sit in bed each morning and read from the bible, while I did my exercises. I was not able to see the wisdom in that activity at that time. Now I do, for I have experienced the second reading: the Word of God is living and active, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. It was also able to help a proud, stubborn priest learn that he needs to change and let go of false pride in his life.

There is great wisdom in what we are doing now – celebrating the Eucharist, or perhaps a Sunday liturgy of the word. We have let go of other things to come together as People of God to focus on the Word of God and the Body of Christ. God will reward our wisdom with more wisdom, the experience of the kingdom of God and a taste of eternal life, right here and now. God will also empower us to go out to spread that Good News to others and help build up the Reign of God here on earth.

So remember, we can take to heaven only what we give away. Be wise; let go of dependence on wealth and false pride, and soak up the Word of God.