

Reason and Revelation

By Joseph Wood

September 8, 2019 – Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Readings: Wisdom 9.13-18b; Philemon 9-10, 12-17; Luke 14.25-33

How do we know what is real, the truth of things? Can we know anything at all? And how do we know what we are to do, to have a good life, to thrive, to reach our end as creatures of God, to know him fully and to love him as he created us to? How do we get to heaven?

Some people, and some philosophers, believe that we cannot really know anything. Everything that we think we see or know might be some sort of an illusion. And if that kind of skepticism holds for physical things, it might be even more true for immaterial things. These skeptics would say we cannot know if there is a God, or if there is, what he expects of us or whether he expects anything at all.

Some early Protestant thinkers, such as Luther, believed that after the fall of man in the garden of Eden, our reason was so corrupted that we could know nothing at all just by using our own mind. We should rely instead only on scripture to know what is true, to know what to do.

The Catholic tradition is different. The Church teaches that while our reason is fallible and we can't know everything, we are unique among the animals in that God made us, like him, rational, and free to use our reason to make choices. The fall of Adam and Eve surely complicated things: our separation from God leaves us with many questions, and a lot of bad answers to those questions. We can figure out many things on our own, but we need the grace of revelation to know how God plans to restore us to himself. We have to both have faith and use our reason.

How We Are to Know

Today's readings all center on this theme of how we are to know what we should know, what we must know to thrive and to get to heaven.

The first reading is from the book of Wisdom, one of the Old Testament's seven sapiential books that describe how some particular figures – Job or David or Solomon – gained wisdom about what is and what we are supposed to do, how we are to choose to worship and love God. These books teach us the wisdom that these wise men – wise but flawed and fallible – came to grasp. God is the source of wisdom, and wisdom is much more than we can find on Google or Wikipedia. Siri seems to know a lot, but she is not Wisdom.

The classical philosophical tradition that the Church has found helpful holds that all knowledge begins in the senses. We know things using our sight, our hearing, our taste and touch. Then, using our reason, we can start to understand more about the reality that we can sense, and about the reality beyond our senses. We use the senses of our bodies to examine God's creation and to know more about it – to develop a greater understanding of the physical things around us and about the immaterial truths of creation and the Creator.

Wisdom is both knowledge of what we call facts, empirical knowledge, and a much larger understanding of deeper truths, about the final causes of things, about the ultimate truths. Sometimes these deeper, first truths are

called metaphysics, the immaterial truths that are beyond the physical things around us that we can sense or measure. Metaphysics may seem like a big word or an abstract concept, but whenever we pray, we are asking the source of all good things, the source that transcends all good things, for what we need. We think about metaphysics whether we know it or not.

The writer of today's first reading is frustrated, and grateful. That's a good combination for us to keep in mind. He wants to know more, more about the things of the earth, and more importantly he wants to know more about salvation. But knowing things is hard. With all of our effort, we can know something about the physical universe. And how much harder it is to know the metaphysical truths, the first and fundamental realities, the mind and plan of God. Our reason alone will not get us there. We need revelation, and we should be very grateful for that revelation.

We will never know the fullness of those metaphysical truths, of the inner life of the Trinity, but the Wisdom writer is not a total skeptic. He says we can know something about these truths because God sends the Holy Spirit, the advocate, the paraclete, the teacher. The Holy Spirit straightens our ways, he unclouds our minds, enough for us to find the way to God, or to let him find us. We need grace to know what God wants us to know, in his revelation of himself to us. Our reason is powerful and useful, but it takes God to give us real wisdom.

We begin our search for wisdom, as the psalmist says elsewhere, with fear of God. "Fear" here is not abject terror. It is a deep respect, an awe, for what God is, for his perfection and for his love, and for his creation. It is the just attitude, the right and suitable relationship, between ourselves and God. When we get that attitude, that spiritual posture, correct, wisdom becomes possible.

Another Problem

But our Wisdom writer raises another problem. Our bodies seem to weigh us down and hold us back from the understanding of God. Our physical appetites preoccupy us. When we don't have enough to meet our physical needs, most of us can't think well about God. When we do have our needs met, our appetites seem to turn us first toward getting more of whatever physical things we want. There seems to be a conflict between our bodies and our spirits.

And there is such a conflict. That's another result of the fall of man – our reason struggles to govern our bodies. The Wisdom writer can see, using his reason, that there's a big problem here, one that we cannot reason our way out of. St. Thomas Aquinas teaches, following Aristotle, that without God we can develop some control of our appetites with good habits and virtues. We can make some progress on our own to getting the relationship right between our reason and our bodily wants. But to make that relationship fully what God intended – fully human in the best sense – we need revelation, we need wisdom, we need the grace that the Holy Spirit brings.

Christ illustrates this in today's gospel from Luke. He describes the importance of planning, of deliberation, in human affairs. He gives the examples of building a tower or deciding whether to go to war. He does not condemn those activities. He points to the importance of our using our reason in human affairs to get things right, to succeed. In the far more important metaphysical domain of our salvation, of turning to the way and the truth and the life, we also need a plan, but it is a plan that looks very different from the one that human reason might come up with on its own, at least until our reason is brought from serving ourselves to serving God.

Seek Something Higher

Our reason can help us navigate the problems of the human and physical world. But Christ reveals that to find salvation, we have to seek something much higher than our physical wants and needs, our human aspirations. We need our reason here, too, to listen to revelation and to look beyond our bodies and seek not pleasure, not ease and comfort, but the Cross. This is counterintuitive; for skeptics of metaphysical truth, it flies in the face of reason. But Christ is quite clear. It is a hard teaching, perhaps as hard as when he tells us we must eat his flesh and drink his blood to be saved.

We have to look even beyond what is most precious to us, our families, our natural relations, which are surely good but not the final good. We have to conduct our human affairs knowing that they are not our final end, that the terms of success in salvation look different than a tower or a battle victory or a peace treaty. We have to know that any good things in this life are good only if we order them to God above all else.

The wisdom of salvation is to know that this world is passing, that Christ's kingdom is not of this world. The bodies we have in this life, the things that seem to hold us back from God yet are essential to our getting to salvation, are not the bodies we will have for eternity. The towers we build here have their place, the conflicts of earthly affairs demand our planning, but we will know Christ only by knowing that he demands our full and best attention, a demand that only the Holy Spirit can show us how to meet.

If we listen, if we follow despite what our bodies might seem to ask and what our reason might seem to tell us about how to succeed in this world, we'll have the joy and gladness, the wisdom of heart, that today's psalm holds out as our first and last end, our reconciliation with God.

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For Further Reading

- *Benedict XVI, **General Audience (November 21, 2012)***
- ***Catechism of the Catholic Church, ##26-49***
- *Avery Cardinal Dulles, **“John Paul II and the Truth about Freedom”***

In Short . . .

- *While our reason is fallible and we can't know everything, we are unique in that God made us rational and free to use our reason to make choices.*
- *We can figure out many things on our own, but we need the grace of revelation to know how God plans to restore us to himself.*
- *God sends the Holy Spirit, who straightens our ways and unclouds our minds enough for us to find the way to God, or to let him find us.*
- *To find salvation we need reason to listen to revelation and to look beyond our bodies and seek not pleasure, not ease and comfort, but the Cross.*
- *Any good things in this life are truly good only if we order them to God above all else.*
- *The wisdom of salvation is to know that this world is passing, that Christ's kingdom is not of this world.*