

# TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Since these questions will be out of context and unexpected, pause between them to let your listeners ponder.

Don't sound harsh; this is a reflection on the human condition, not a condemnation.

The text is saying that our humanity is limited in its ability to grasp the greater truths.

Express both joy and gratitude that God has given us at least a degree of understanding.

End on a note of humble gratitude.

## LECTIONARY #129

READING I Wisdom 9:13-18b

### A reading from the Book of Wisdom

Who can know God's counsel,  
or who can conceive what the LORD intends?  
For the deliberations of mortals are timid,  
and unsure are our plans.  
For the corruptible body burdens the soul  
and the earthen shelter weighs down the mind  
that has many concerns.  
And scarce do we guess the things on earth,  
and what is within our grasp we find with difficulty;  
but when things are in heaven, who can search them out?  
Or who ever knew your counsel, except you had given wisdom  
and sent your holy spirit from on high?  
And thus were the paths of those on earth made straight.

**READING I** The Book of Wisdom, though written by an unknown author, presents its teachings as if the wise king Solomon is speaking. Today's reading is from the prayer of Solomon in which he asks God, "Give me wisdom." He requests further that wisdom "may be with me and work with me, that I may know what is your pleasure." According to Solomon, wisdom knows and understands all things and will guide him and make his deeds acceptable. Having extolled wisdom, Solomon questions in the opening verse today, "Who can know God's coun-

sel?" While wisdom knows all things, human deliberations, including Solomon's own, are timid, resulting in unsure plans. Our bodies burden our souls, and weigh down our minds. Because of such burden and weight, we must guess about things on earth, and can grasp them only with difficulty. Since even things of earth cannot be comprehended by human effort alone, things of heaven are clearly beyond our grasp.

After Solomon's probing questions and musing, in which he seems downcast by the limitations of mere mortals, he again addresses God directly. The question in

which he asks who could know divine counsel contains an implicit answer: only those to whom God has given wisdom through the holy spirit sent from on high will know God's counsel. The holy spirit, though not yet understood as the Holy Spirit of Christian tradition, is at least a foreshadowing. The spirit is a source of wisdom, and guides the wise on their life's paths. The final sentence in today's reading is followed by an even greater affirmation of wisdom's power: "Men learned what was your pleasure and were saved by Wisdom."

For meditation and context:

RESPONSORIAL PSALM Psalm 90:3-4, 5-6, 12-13, 14, 17 (1)

**R. In every age, O Lord, you have been our refuge.**

You turn man back to dust,  
saying, "Return, O children of men."  
For a thousand years in your sight  
are as yesterday, now that it is past,  
or as a watch of the night.

You make an end of them in their sleep;  
the next morning they are like the  
changing grass,  
which at dawn springs up anew,  
but by evening wilts and fades.

Teach us to number our days aright,  
that we may gain wisdom of heart.  
Return, O LORD! How long?  
Have pity on your servants!

Fill us at daybreak with your kindness,  
that we may shout for joy and gladness all  
our days.  
And may the gracious care of the LORD our  
God be ours;  
prosper the work of our hands for us!  
Prosper the work of our hands!

READING II Philemon 9-10, 12-17

**A reading from the Letter of Saint Paul to Philemon**

**I, Paul, an old man,**  
**and now also a prisoner for Christ Jesus,**  
**urge you on behalf of my child Onesimus,**  
**whose father I have become in my imprisonment;**  
**I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you.**  
**I should have liked to retain him for myself,**  
**so that he might serve me on your behalf**  
**in my imprisonment for the gospel,**  
**but I did not want to do anything without your consent,**  
**so that the good you do might not be forced but voluntary.**  
**Perhaps this is why he was away from you for a while,**  
**that you might have him back forever,**  
**no longer as a slave**  
**but more than a slave, a brother,**  
**beloved especially to me, but even more so to you,**  
**as a man and in the Lord.**  
**So if you regard me as a partner, welcome him as you would me.**

Philemon = fi-LEE-muhn

Paul does not refrain from using every  
persuasive angle: I am *old* and a *prisoner*.

Onesimus = oh-NES-uh-muhs

Stress Paul's designation of Onesimus as his  
"child."

Paul continues to pour it on: Onesimus is his  
very "heart"!

He's saying, I overcame my own desires  
in order to do the right thing (suggesting,  
perhaps, that Philemon now also do the  
right thing).

Paul grows more serious and philosophical  
here. Slow your pace.

Onesimus' conversion should impact  
Philemon even more than Paul.

beloved = bee-LUHVD

Paul clinches his argument with an appeal to  
Philemon's esteem for their relationship.

**READING II** While Paul was in prison, a runaway slave named Onesimus came to Paul in his imprisonment. Since running away from his master makes Onesimus subject to severe punishment, Paul writes to his master, Philemon, on Onesimus' behalf. Even though the letter is brief, the shortest of biblical books, it is filled with emotion and clever strategies to convince Philemon to do as Paul asks.

To begin with, Paul stresses his relationship with Onesimus, writing of him as "my child" and "my own heart." Paul may have baptized Onesimus, or at least have

been closely involved in his conversion to Christ. With such a close relationship founded on their shared faith, Paul is subtly urging Philemon to see Onesimus as Paul sees him: as a beloved brother. In addition, by telling Philemon that he wants him to act voluntarily, Paul is reminding Philemon of the respect and authority that Paul wields. Both as an old man and as a prisoner suffering for the sake of the Gospel, Paul's word should carry weight.

Paul does not specify exactly what it means to take Onesimus back as a brother. When he writes "no longer as a slave," Paul

may not be advocating the legal release of Onesimus, but he certainly is pointing to the new relationship he will have with Philemon and the church that meets in his house. Philemon should welcome Onesimus just as he would have welcomed Paul. Writing of the kind of welcome that Paul would expect, he tells Philemon at the conclusion of the letter to prepare a guest room for him. If Paul actually visits Philemon's house, he will see for himself how Onesimus has been welcomed.