

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, A – July 26, 2020 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham – 5pm Vigil, 7:15, 8:30, & 11am Sunday Masses – 725 words

Imagine if, like he did for King Solomon in the first reading, the Lord appeared to us in a dream and said, “Ask something of me and I will give it to you”! What would be our wish? But this is probably not so difficult for us to imagine, because as children we all fantasized about this very thing; it was a theme in programming and literature. But what is usually asked of the genie – or of the one who is otherwise able to grant any wish? Common requests are for things like wealth, fame, or love. What would we ask for? We know what Solomon requested.

“I am a mere youth, not knowing at all how to act”, Solomon said to the Lord. “Give your servant, therefore, an understanding heart to judge your people and to distinguish right from wrong.” But is this not a rather lame – even weak -- request? But the Lord commended him for it; it was indeed pleasing to God. It behooves us to consider why that was the case – and, perhaps, even though the Lord has not appeared to us in a dream and offered us anything we want, nevertheless to pray asking him for understanding hearts also.

Yes, Solomon could have asked for money, recognition, romance, or so many other things. But there would have been something implicit in those requests – something that made them less than perfect. And that is that it would have been asking God to give him total control over those areas of his life. If he asked for riches? He would have been asking for financial independence from God. The same with the others. It would have been as if he said, “Give me these things, so that I do not have to rely on you any longer – so that I can make my own plans.”

The petition for an “understanding heart” pleases God, for unlike the other possibilities, it does not dethrone him. A heart that seeks understanding recognizes that it is the Lord who has the plan; that “all things work for good for those who love God”, as St. Paul said in the second reading. And in Jeremiah we read, “‘I know well the plans that I have for you,’ says the Lord. ‘Plans for peace and not for affliction, plans to give you a future full of hope’.” The understanding heart trusts that God is working for good even when the things we might wish for are lacking.

Indeed, if the Lord has plans for our good and has the means to bring them to fulfillment – which he most certainly does – then the goal of understanding his will must be that pearl of great price that we heard of in the gospel. We cannot reach the kingdom of heaven through our own calculations or plans, but only by following God’s. I think often of Christ’s words to Peter after the resurrection: “When you were young, you dressed yourself and went where you wanted. But when you are old... another will dress you and lead you where you did not wish to go.”

In that moment Jesus contextualized St. Peter’s life in terms of his growth in charity. When he was young, he selfishly followed his own designs; indeed, if God or a genie had given him a wish, he might have asked for something base or otherwise worldly. But by the time he grew old, he had grown in charity, such that he was able to allow “another” – namely, God – to lead him where he would not have chosen to go in his youthful folly. Yes, we are fallen creatures; we like the idea of heaven but we cannot get there unless we submit to God.

Do we have the courage, then, to pray for that wisdom that Solomon did – and to do so often? The understanding heart is secure in the knowledge that all things truly do work for good for those who love God. And I frame it in terms of courage, also, because our present time is especially challenging. In many ways, it is more difficult than ever to trust that the Lord’s plan is being fulfilled. We especially need his wisdom in these present trials – so that we can continue to grow in his love, trusting in his plan and following wherever he leads us.