

17th Sunday of Year – Year A

What would you do if a powerful person came to you and told you to express your desire for anything on earth? Some might ask for riches, some for power, some for home or safety or health care or a good job, some for esteem and praise from others. But in today's first reading, when God Himself asks this, a powerful king asks for only one thing: an understanding heart to be able to govern his people with wisdom and discernment. This is a quality that is sadly needed in world leaders today, but which is rarely if ever seen in practice. Yet Solomon was wise enough to ask for this one thing. And the Lord praised him for this and promised to give him a wise and discerning heart.

In today's gospel, Jesus compares the very kingdom of heaven to a man who seeks to find a treasure hidden in a field or a pearl of great price which one discovers. What is this treasure and this great pearl? Our first reading again tells us exactly what it is. It is that understanding heart which manifested the wisdom of Solomon. It is this which conforms us to the image of the Son of God, as Paul tells us in the second reading. And ultimately it is this conformity to Christ which is the treasure which we are to find and to live out in our daily lives.

And how are we most conformed to Christ the Son of God? Jesus Himself tells us in another place in the gospels: "Learn of Me, for I am meek and lowly of heart". A heart that is meek and lowly is automatically an understanding heart. And such a heart is most conformed not only to Jesus Christ as man, but to God Himself

Whose heart is that of mercy and love. "I desire not the death of the sinner, but that he be converted and live".

If one has an understanding heart, we will be much slower to judge and condemn one another. If we see someone lose his temper at another, we will not simply judge that person, but will recognize within our heart that that person is hurting within, is fearful and insecure. He feels his treasure to be threatened in some way. Likewise if we see someone overcome by drugs or alcohol or sex, we do not judge, but understand that that person is also threatened because he or she does not have the treasure that is sought in these things.

Our world today is filled with people who are fearful and threatened in many ways. They may have lost job or home or spouse or loved one or security or self-esteem, and they seek reassurance in things which cannot give true assurance. But if they can be approached by someone with an understanding heart, someone who will not judge and condemn them, but recognize them as a brother or sister who is hurting and in pain, then society and the world at large can move toward that sense of unity and love which Jesus came to reveal to us. "Has no man condemned you? Neither do I condemn you. Go in peace and sin no more!"

But all too often we fail to respond in such a manner. Even the leaders of the world fail in this respect and respond only with more anger and venom and consequently beget only further hurt and pain and alienation. As St. James says in his epistle: "What causes wars, and what causes fighting among you? Is it not your passions that are at war in your members? You desire and do not have; so you kill.

And you covet and cannot obtain; so you fight and wage war. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.”

But Jesus has come into this world to reveal to us another way, another heart, which is the heart of God Himself – a heart of love and mercy – an understanding heart. It is such a heart which is our greatest treasure, our pearl of great price. And it is ours if we but ask for it – and for it alone!

Jesus offers us this treasure in simple bread and wine, but bread which is broken and wine which is crushed, as our hearts must be if we are to relinquish our false treasures and claim that true treasure in Christ Jesus our Lord.