

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

The James Webb Space Telescope sent us dazzling images this summer. The beauty and complexity of outer space reveal worlds beyond our imagining. Astronomers calculate that the universe we inhabit formed from the big bang 13.8 billion years ago. Some of the light we're seeing in those Webb images is 13 billion years old; we're seeing baby pictures of the universe. I don't fully understand this, but scientists also say, when I turn the knob on my radio, some of the static I hear between stations is the noise of the big bang reaching my ears today. Albert Einstein asked the provocative religious question, "Did God have a choice in making the universe?" Some have replied that the improbability of us being here is so great, that there was only one way God could have made this happen. But who can know the ways of God?

Today's first reading proclaims the difficulty of knowing what God knows. It comes from the Book of Wisdom, itself a measly 2000 years old. It asks rhetorically, "who can conceive what the Lord intends?" We have all encountered the frailties of the human body. The Book of Wisdom notes, "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?" The only way to know what God wants is for God to send the Holy Spirit from on high with gifts of wisdom. The lectionary gives us this reading today ahead of Jesus' parables about making proper plans before building a tower or marching into battle, lest the misfortunes of nature or our own ignorance lead to doom. Important as it is to plan any major task before beginning it, the Book of Wisdom reminds us that "the deliberations of mortals are timid, and unsure are our plans." These verses may also be found in a Mass for the sick and the dying, and on the memorial of a man many regard as the smartest of the saints, Thomas Aquinas. Even he didn't know everything.

Planning for the future works best when we rely on God's wisdom, which is often inscrutable. We don't understand why the innocent suffer, why peace is elusive in our homes and between nations, why people choose sin over grace, and why our fondest dreams fade from view. We trust that God in heaven has a better plan; it's just hard to figure out what on earth it is.

In establishing our hopes, we aim high. We trust that God wants what is good for us and for society. Yet two conditions affect our goals. One is the frailty of our bodies. We cannot physically achieve all we have in mind. The other is the majesty of God's universe, which is expanding, unknowable, and ultimately beautiful whenever someone shows us pictures. When our plans go unrealized, it is human to feel disappointed, but we may not yet have grasped the wisdom of God, a wisdom that has made some other plan a better one that achieves a higher goal. The Book of Wisdom says we come to know those divine plans if God sends the Holy Spirit for us to grasp them. Sometimes that happens, and we accept our misfortunes because we perceive a bigger, more beautiful picture. Other times we never learn why a turn of events took place or how they help God's wisdom unfold. There is much we do not know, and this is where faith and trust enter. Whether it's the beauty of the stars or the static on our radio, the wonders of God's presence surround us. When we meditate on this extraordinary order, it becomes easier to believe God is not just mysterious, but wise.

Sunday, September 4, 2022