

Never Assurances Always One More Thing!

28th Sunday of Ordinary Time – Year B

Wisdom 7:7-11
Psalm 90:12-13, 14-15, 16-17

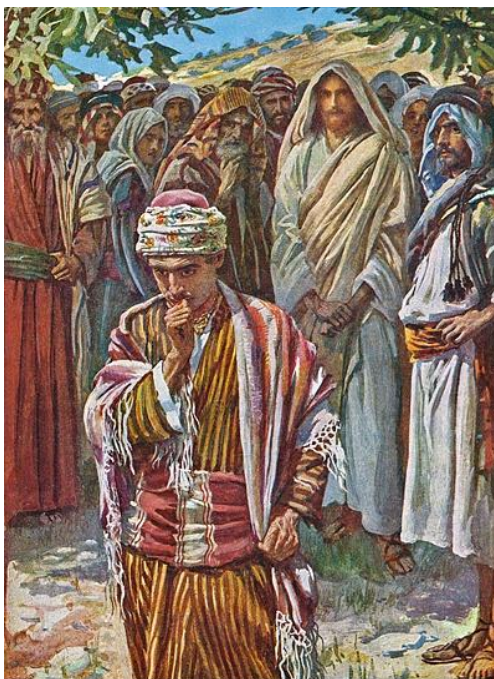
Hebrews 4:12-13
Mark 10:17-27

In the Gospel story of the encounter between Jesus and the Rich Young Man, all appears to be going well, as the man assures Jesus that he has indeed lived the commandments since his youth. Expecting, perhaps, an assurance back from Jesus, or affirmation that he is on the right track, he receives instead one more thing to do – “sell what you have, and give to the poor . . . then come, follow me” (Mark 10:21). Instead of being uplifted (perhaps his primary expectation from an encounter with Jesus), the young man departs crestfallen, discouraged and sad. In response, Jesus utters a principle that is lacking in assurances, but serves as a wake up call to his listeners – “How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” (Mark 10:23).

No one can deny the love Jesus had for his Apostles and the Rich Young Man. Indeed, the Gospel reading tells us that in the face of the rich man’s self-assurance in having kept the law from his youth, “Jesus, looking at him, loved him,” and loving him said, nonetheless, “You are [still] lacking in one thing.”

In response to this encounter, the Apostles, astonished at this principle uttered by Jesus, assure Jesus that they have indeed done as He instructed the rich man – “we have given up everything and followed you” (Mark 10:28) – perhaps themselves expecting affirmation and assurance from a man who they saw not only as teacher, but as friend. In the midst of the lavish spiritual rewards Jesus assures his followers when they follow his command – (“a hundred times more . . . houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands”) – Jesus adds one more thing to what his disciples can expect. All these rewards will come “with persecutions” (Mark 10:30).

Both the Rich Young Man and the Apostles discovered a very important fact about Jesus. C.S. Lewis, quoting his spiritual mentor George MacDonald, noted, “God is easy to please, but hard to satisfy.” For the Rich Young Man who had lived the commandments, there was still one more thing to do; perhaps for him, the hardest task of all. For the Apostles who had given up everything to follow Jesus (the very task the Rich Young Man found so difficult),



The Rich Young Man by Harold Copping

The Rich Young Man

there was also one more thing, persecutions that will be suffered as part of following Jesus; perhaps for them, the hardest task, seeing how they fled in the face of such suffering when Jesus, Himself, was arrested.

In our modern religious mindset, we often focus only on how much Jesus loves us; how God is a Father, not a judge (and a father who spoils his children at that). Very seldom do we reflect on just how demanding God is when it comes to embracing and living the Gospel as we follow Christ in faith. How often do people, especially our elders, begin to retreat behind a religious and spiritual complacency, believing that they have done enough, that they can enjoy a steady, stable spiritual life, confident in their relationship with God and in the habits they have formed throughout their lives; that they can “retire” believing in all of the devotions, worship and prayers they have built up throughout their lives (or are piling up at the last minute as they reach the end of it); secure, as was the Rich Young Man, in their fulfillment of the precepts of their faith and their keeping it from their youth?

No one denies the love Christ has for all of us, a love he shares from his Father for those who follow him. Neither can one deny that God is pleased with all of our honest efforts to embrace and practice our faith both in how we live our lives and in how we worship God. At the same time, as a God who is hard to satisfy, we never see an example in the Scriptures where Jesus says, “you’re doing just fine. Keep it up.” Nor is He a God who will ever give us assurance, apart from saying, “You are not far ...” but he never says, “You’re there!” (except His assurance to the good thief

as they both hang from the cross). Rather, He will constantly remind us that we could always do a little more, that there will always be “one more thing” we are lacking in order to reach the perfection vital to being worthy of inheriting eternal life. In light of the fact that Jesus is “easy to please, but hard to satisfy,” how many of us, as we picture a God who loves us, as we engage in the spiritual worship and devotional life of the Church, or simply go about our daily lives, secure in our standing before God, also picture Christ looking at us with love and saying, “you are still lacking in one thing.”

As we go through life looking for assurances and guarantees, looking for encouragement and some sign that we are on the right track, let us embrace our loving God as He truly is – easy to please, but hard to satisfy. Let us not fall into retired complacency, presumptively secure in our standing before God. Rather, let us see ourselves, with the Rich Young Man and the Twelve, standing before Christ. Let us see Christ looking upon us with love, but let us also hear Christ giving us no assurances, except to tell us

“you are lacking in one thing.” Whatever that one thing may be for each of us, let us embrace it with joy as He draws us deeper and deeper in to the true essence of discipleship – with never a guarantee, but always with “one more thing” yet to do to become a more perfect follower of Christ.

Fr. William Nicholas
Catholic San Francisco
October 9, 2009

...[Jesus] will constantly remind us that we could always do a little more, that there will always be more required of us, that there will always be “one more thing”...