

# SUNDAY BULLETIN

THINKING FAITH

## How to read the Bible



Fr Nicholas King SJ guides us through the Old Testament's Wisdom literature.



6 SEPTEMBER 2020

23RD SUNDAY  
IN ORDINARY TIME

YEAR A

DIVINE OFFICE WEEK III

## THE WISDOM LITERATURE

What we call the "Wisdom literature" asks questions like "What is the meaning of life?", and because this is part of the culture of Israel, it always includes the vital question: "Where is God?" Now the "Wisdom literature" comes in several shapes and sizes, and at times God's presence is a bit obscured; one example might be the extraordinary piece of work that is the book of Job, which teaches us that it is permissible to argue with God about (for example) innocent suffering and the silence of God. "Ecclesiastes" or "the Preacher" is another work that attacks over-comfortable certainties, and some scholars regard it as very odd that it got into the Jewish Bible (it is never quoted in the New Testament and hardly ever mentions God), given how it challenges complacent orthodoxies about God's goodness; there are those who think that it might be a book for our time and our present crisis of religious faith. Another puzzling piece of work in the Wisdom tradition is the remarkable collection of frankly erotic poetry that we call the "Song of Songs"; Jewish and Christian readers have found here the pattern of the believer's love of God, though here again the author does not see fit to mention God.

Then there is the book of "Proverbs", a collection of instructions for the young; these instructions come in many shapes and sizes, some apparently stemming from the Egyptian court, others from ordinary life. Interestingly, it is a very Old Testament text, in that again and again it emphasises that we are to be on the side of those who are poor. A very significant passage is chapter 8, where Wisdom is personified as one who was present with God in creation (see 8:23, 30, for example); this was of enormous help for the early Christians when they wanted to find language that captured what they wanted to say about Jesus while not surrendering their Jewish monotheism. And the whole collection ends with a charming portrait of a good wife from a clearly grateful husband.

Dear Parishioner,

It is with much delight that we can return to the public celebration of Holy Mass. A warm welcome back! We have all lived in the wilderness for too long, some of us ending up feeling lonely and afraid.

We can now enjoy a long-awaited return to the community celebration of our faith, to togetherness, to being nourished and fed by the Bread of Life.

Let us give thanks for all that we have received, all that has been taken away, and all that has been left behind. It is our intention to repeat this message in our Newsletters to remind us to reflect on the past and rejoice in the present as we reunite around the altar to receive, once more, the Eucharist.

Finally in this "Wisdom" section (the Psalms are generally included here, but we looked at them in a previous week) are two books that do not survive in Hebrew. The first of these is the book of Wisdom; this was written in Greek, very possibly by someone in the lively Greek-speaking Jewish community of Alexandria in Egypt, somewhere between the third and first centuries BC. The author knows the biblical texts well, but also has some acquaintance with the Greek philosophical tradition; and one of his aims perhaps is to reassure his fellow Jews that their religious traditions are quite as good as those of the dazzling and hi-tech society in which they find themselves living. This is also the first

Old Testament text to proclaim a belief in life after death.

The other book is "Ecclesiasticus" or "The Wisdom of Jesus ben Sira", translated into Greek by the author's grandson in about 130 BC; he is a very faithful Jew, and is seeking to bring the Jewish Wisdom tradition close to the Law and the Prophets. Like Proverbs, he personifies Wisdom as one who was with God at the very beginning (see 24:1-23), and identifies her with the Jewish Law, a daring innovation which helped early Christians to find ways of talking about Jesus.

## EXTRAORDINARY RICHNESS

The Wisdom tradition has an extraordinary richness in its attempt to talk about the things that really matter in life, and in telling the story of God and of the people of God. My suggestion is that you should read slowly and contemplatively through all these texts.

## Mass text

### ENTRANCE ANTIPHON

**You are just, O Lord, and your judgement is right;  
treat your servant in accord with your merciful  
love**

### FIRST READING Ezekiel 33:7-9

### PSALM Psalm 94

**RESPONSE O that today you would listen to  
his voice!  
Harden not your hearts.**

1. Come, ring out our joy to the Lord;  
hail the rock who saves us.  
Let us come before him, giving thanks,  
with songs let us hail the Lord. **R.**
2. Come in; let us bow and bend low;  
let us kneel before the God who made us  
for he is our God and we  
the people who belong to his pasture,  
the flock that is led by his hand. **R.**
3. O that today you would listen to his voice!  
"Harden not your hearts as at Meribah,  
as on that day at Massah in the desert  
when your fathers put me to the test;  
when they tried me, though they saw my  
work." **R.**

### SECOND READING Romans 13:8-10

### GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

**Alleluia, alleluia!  
Your word is truth, O Lord,  
consecrate us in the truth.  
Alleluia!**

### GOSPEL Matthew 18:15-20

### COMMUNION ANTIPHON

**Like the deer that yearns for running streams,  
so my soul is yearning for you, my God;  
my soul is thirsting for God, the living God.**

**Next Sunday's Readings:**  
Ecclesiasticus 27:30 – 28:7  
Romans 14:7-9  
Matthew 18:21-35



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