

Reflection/commentary for *Lectio Divina*, 16th Sunday Ordinary Time
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Wisdom, actually called Wisdom of Solomon, is the youngest book in what we call the Old Testament, perhaps even younger than Paul and the gospels. It is, unlike most of the Hebrew Bible, written in Greek, likely in Alexandria in northern Egypt. The attribution to Solomon, whose traditional date is a full millennium earlier, is honorific, praising both Solomon and the book as wise. Scholars call the author of the book The Sage. The book's main purpose seems to be to bear witness to the presence of divine Wisdom throughout creation and to show her—Wisdom, Sophia—as consistently active with/as God on our behalf, in deep partnership with all creatures, human and other. We may recall a passage in Proverbs 8, also praising wisdom, where she is God's first creature. The claim here goes beyond that. The interest in wisdom was a very international one at the time, and we may know famous Greeks, Romans, and Egyptians who wrote on the subject. Wisdom of Solomon is a wonderful conversation partner with what we now call new cosmology, avoiding certain dichotomies of classic Aristotelian and Thomistic philosophy (spirit/matter, life/death, sacred/secular) to offer a fresh sense of how divine energy wells up from within the cosmos, splashing happily over edges we had thought firm. Wisdom's underpinnings challenge us to move beyond some common images we may have domesticated to experience God afresh. If we are satisfied, if grumpily, with God as a sort of big human in the sky and content, satisfied more happily, with Jesus as God's special agent coping briefly with our human condition, we can ignore this book. If, on the other hand, we long to move deeper than the mad dad and the dutiful son, Wisdom is for us, with its challenge to us to experience the divine more richly and diversely. All that is good news; the other news is that the book is difficult to dip into and not well suited to snippets pulled from here and there and then truncated further to suit a Sunday liturgy.

But a snippet-*additionally-shorn* is what we have here, and so I want to sieve it through today's other readings, which are more familiar to us. We know that the lectionary and liturgy typically find a fit among the first reading, the response psalm, and the gospel, while the second reading is the continuous unfolding of a biblical book, here Paul's letter to the Romans...weeks of it! Today all the readings fit well together, and so I will count on them as I speak of Wisdom 12:13 and 16-18, brief as they may be.

What is the question: for the Sage, for the psalmist, for Paul, and for Jesus in Matthew, and for us? You may differ from me on it, but I hear it as this: Is God, as divine Wisdom permeating the universe, including our human experience, able to help us? Or better: *How is* God helping us, is Sophia doing so, and what is our creaturely collaborative role? What are our choices? May we refuse? And what is the nature of resistance to God as Sophia? What are the alternatives? How do we know how to choose, love to choose well? Choose what? Love what?

One more quick preliminary point: The book is divided into two uneven parts, joined with a hinge. The first half (chs. 1-9) is more philosophical, discoursing on wisdom, justice, and virtue. A common funeral reading talks about wisdom saving the just into God's hand, no torment touching them. The hinge (ch. 10) offers some fresh views of scenes from Genesis we thought we knew but get now with a twist: For example, wisdom was the rudder that steered Noah's ark to safety. So a "paltry piece of wood," working beneath the boat, unseen, unappreciated, saved Noah's kin into life. The second half of the book (chs. 11-19) provides a mixed salad of plagues in Egypt and misadventures later in the desert, claiming that the events that trounced the unjust benefitted the just; the just accepted Sophia's transformative energy while the unjust saw their choices, hated the good option, refused it, missed out, and so vanished. No eternal hot punishment; just cessation of being, while the just live on in time unlimited, in the hand of God. Today's reading comes from this second half of the book.

How does this information help today's readings? Our snippet praises God/Sophia for her justice, fairness, leniency and help: In nearby verses that we might have heard, had they not been excised, we would have heard how scary animals (Pharaoh's frogs or warning wasps experienced in the desert) could have been helpful to the unjust, but were not. Had Pharaoh paid attention to the frogs, he'd have saved his son—the other firstborn as well. But he declined. We wonder why. It is one of the deepest questions of our human experience: why resist the good? I suggest that this issue may be the most urgent one of today's readings: Why do we sleep through so much that is distressful around us, and how will Sophia wake us up? The psalm thanks God for hearing us when we cry from our acknowledged need, by responding with gracious and generous fidelity. Paul, in his longer argument about what is on offer from God—larger than what his people had previously thought or imagined—shows us God/Sophia Spirit laboring to supplement our feeble efforts with intense and heartfelt action, helping God's just ones get what God wants

them to have, wants us to have. What we need is available, if we don't refuse it ahead of time. Jesus in Matthew offers first a parable of how good and evil are not so simple or clear-cut as we may think but are in fact often blended, intertwined, inexplicably presenting creation with choices and mixed situations, not so amenable to easy solution. A second parable shows good unexpectedly and almost unrecognizably emerging from something mundane, able to be more powerful than we first supposed. The good is present, visible, available to all who recognize it; nothing is arcane, reserved, withheld. But we can resist; we need not recognize and love the good. The parable and two quick images (mustard shrub and leaven) slide us back to the question of discerning the good: How will we, with the backpacks of regretted weakness that we all lug around, find the good in the midst of so many unhealthy opportunities? The Sage has told us earlier in the book (6:12-16) that, before we emerge sleepy and grumpy to begin our moral and spiritual day, Sophia is already sitting on our doorstep with coffee, waiting to lend us a hand. She has already started singing her song to God that Paul calls inexpressible groanings but is music to God's ear.

So: *How does this help us?* Let me sketch four quick ways, and you will know others.

First, we are reminded that Wisdom's gifts well up in the universe in more ways that we can begin to know, are on offer at every step we take. They do not arrive as occasional interventions from without. Insofar as we can grasp God as divine presence urging us to greater relationship and deeper consciousness with all that exists, our opportunities for experiencing God widen and deepen. The universe, large to small, takes on a fresh role of hosting life at all levels, and we humans feel assisted to participate. Our traditional ways of knowing God are not lost but enhanced, and we are consoled that much is mystery, if we have felt over-confident of theology's ways to name God adequately—or if theology has gone flat for us.

Second, on the topic of refusing the good, denial of that relationship: We may all know refusers, but I suspect we know many more people who have rather lost interest, have wandered out of relationship with God/Sophia—would be pleased to learn that she is sitting at their doorway with an extra cup of coffee and a bag of bagels, to share us into relationship. These are our family members and our friends, not so much refusing as grown myopic and hard of hearing, or disappointed—or outraged. How can we reintroduce these loved ones to Sophia? We need, I think, to be reminded how they fell out of friendship, to hear with without judging it. We may

find the opportunity to speak of God in language that is both old and new, scriptural and philosophically fresh. Big Refusers: We know a few of them as well, and maybe they and we do well when we pray for them, groan inexpressibly on their behalf as well as working to thwart their projects of hubris. And, if we find *ourselves* stuck on a plateau in our relationship with God, Sophia is ready to give us a gentle shove, or something.

Third, an oddity of this book is that it refuses ethnic designations. There is no labeling of Israelites and Egyptians, though of course we recognize them as characters in this story we all know well. The moral choosers are called the godly and the godless, again challenging our human propensity to harden and count on what are often quite superficial categories. Our ethnic, gender, religious and other distinctions often have their important place, but it can jolt us healthily to override them on occasion: her creatures respond to Sophia or we resist, and our identity markers may not be so entitling or excluding as we often think.

Fourth, we have the whole challenge of *Laudato Si'* and its contexts. That document is a close friend of Wisdom of Solomon, each sharing the sense that what we call nature, or creation, is suffused in every way with God's presence. Creation thus needs our respect and care for more reasons than just our own survival, while including that. The prayer for our earth in Francis's encyclical gives us many images for experiencing the universe as deeply worthy of whatever care we can offer and whatever ways we can work with others for our common health.

That the divine can be experienced sensuously, that key relationships grown stale can be revived, that our willingness to choose may be more open than we assumed, that our motivations for caring for creation are well-grounded: These are not news. But today's readings may help us feel fresh urgency and fresh support, fresh joy and gratitude to God for life in God's hand.

There is useful information in an article I wrote but no longer can get access to: You may have better luck!

"The Wisdom of Solomon and the Solomon of Wisdom: Traditions's Transpositions and Human Transformation" *Horizons* 30.1 (2003): 41-66.