

Homily for July 24, 2011 (17th Sunday in Ordinary Time)
1 Kings 3:5, 7-12; Psalm 119; Romans 8:28-30; Matthew 13:44-52

“Be Careful What You Pray For”

Every week pilgrims who visit the Solanus Casey Center in Detroit leave slips of paper with their prayer intentions on the tomb of venerable priest, who died in 1957. The friars who live at St. Bonaventure Monastery collect these intentions and bring them into their chapel, where prayers are offered for the intentions. Sometimes the top of Fr. Solanus’ tomb is a sea of white paper.

I’ve had the opportunity to read many of the intentions over the years. Many are very personal: prayers for healing, reconciliation, a new job, a better job, for faith and peace of mind, for relatives and friends, etc. Some intentions are more global: peace between nations, environmental protection, and the safety for our troops stationed overseas.

Then there are those intentions that are, well, a little harder to characterize. For several months last year, a pilgrim to the Solanus Center left a prayer intention that said something like, “Pray that I hit the lottery.” As a presumed incentive, it added, “Half will go to ‘the Church.’”

While that written petition itself may have been a little unusual, I suspect that most of us have wished, prayed for, or at least wondered what we would do if we won the lottery. It’s not an idle thought: despite or perhaps because of our economy, and despite the infinitesimal odds of hitting the jackpot, people all over the USA spend tens or even hundreds of millions of dollars every week just for the chance to win.

Many folks think that winning the lottery will solve all of their problems. However, for some “hitting it big” only multiplies those problems! Instead of paying off their debts, they dig deeper and larger holes for themselves. Instead of helping their families and friends, their money becomes a source of contention and division among them. Instead of helping others they find themselves victimized by inept financial “advisors” or worse, opportunistic con artists.

The moral of the story is an ancient one: “Be careful what you wish/pray/ask for....” That was the challenge faced by Solomon in today’s first reading. In this passage from 1 Kings 3 God appears to Solomon almost like the proverbial genie in a bottle. In this case, however, the stakes are far higher. Instead of three wishes, Solomon seems to get just one. “Ask something of me,” God tells him, “and I will give it to you.”

How would you respond to that invitation?

Solomon, a young man who is made king at a time when the kingdom of David his father faces threats not only from other nations but also from internal intrigue and rivalries, doesn't request "the usual suspects" among royal desires: a long life and reign, wealth, or the death of his enemies. Instead, reflecting on his situation and already demonstrating the wisdom that God would multiply with his blessing, Solomon asks: "Give your servant...an understanding heart to judge your people and to distinguish right from wrong."

It's important to note here that in the original Hebrew, Solomon asks for a *leb shomea*, "a listening heart," that is one in tune with the mind and the will of God. If you have a chance this week to open your Bible and read a little further in this passage (beyond the ending provided by the Lectionary) to 1Kings 3:13-14, God also tells Solomon that because he has demonstrated the right priorities he will also be blessed with the things he *didn't* ask for: wealth, protection from his enemies, and if he is faithful to the covenant a long life, and a peaceful death.

Solomon found his buried treasure, his pearl of great price, in living according to the heart, mind and will of God. In our gospel reading, Jesus describes the perfect fulfillment of this state of being as "the kingdom of heaven," a state in which we and our world are in union with God and his purposes. He challenges us as surely as he challenged his disciples to ask how much we are willing to sacrifice for it. How much not of our money but of ourselves are we ready to spend? What are we ready to give up?

Those aren't always easy questions to answer. St. Paul, however, strengthens our resolution by assuring us in our second reading that "all things work for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose." As God's children and through our baptism, we have been predestined to be conformed to Christ. But like Solomon we have a choice to make. Will we choose to accept our destinies by responding to God's call, embracing the justification (right relationship) with God that we have been freely offered, and live in ways that lead to glory; or will we choose something else? It's not always an easy choice—it wasn't for Solomon—and it needs to be made again and again throughout our lives

It is said that, like the lottery, life is a game of chance. That cannot be denied: we live in a world filled with people and things beyond our control. But life is not only a matter of chance; it is also a matter of choices, large and small. May we be careful not only of what we wish, pray, or ask for but also what we work for, so that we may be able to lay claim to that treasure buried in the field, discover that pearl of great price, and, with God's grace and help, obtain them. +