

**Catholic Church of the Beatitudes
Santa Barbara, CA**

Homily for the 19th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C):
Keeping the faith over the long haul

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Reflections on **Wis. 18: 6-9; Heb. 11: 1-2, 8-19; Lk 12: 32-48**

We have come to the 19th weekend in Ordinary Time, near the middle of the long stretch of the liturgical year. Appropriately, today's readings all deal with keeping the faith over the long haul. The first two readings look backward into Jewish history for inspiration, finding lessons in Jewish tradition about God's fidelity to those who put their trust in him. The gospel, as we shall see, approaches the same topic a little differently.

The reading from the Book of Wisdom sounds very abstract on a first hearing, partly because of the way it is excerpted out of the author's long analysis of Jewish history. The focus of that analysis is the Exodus. "That night" in today's passage is the *Passover night* in Egypt: the night when, as the author writes, *your people awaited the salvation of the just and the destruction of their enemies*. Speaking more concretely, that was the night when the angel of God struck down the first-born of the Egyptians, leading to the Israelites' flight from Egypt. As you remember from our Easter vigil, the Israelites remained hunkered down behind closed doors, with the blood of the lamb on their lintels and doorposts, with their loins girded and their feet shod, ready to make a hasty escape.

The Book of Wisdom was the last of the OT books to be written, in the 2nd or 1st century BC. It was written in Greek, not Hebrew, since the intended audience was made up of Jews living in the diaspora, who no longer spoke Hebrew. In fact – ironically – it was written in Egypt, specifically in Alexandria, the large, cosmopolitan, Greek-speaking city in the Nile River delta. Imagine what the Exodus story meant for these Jews, who were once again sojourning in Egypt, as their ancestors had done 1000 years

earlier! They are again living as a religious minority, where they are subject both to the *temptations* of life in a culturally rich city, and to the *dangers* of life among pagans.

This reading urges them to draw strength from the example of their ancestors. The words of today's reading about their forebears applies equally well to these latter-day Jews: they, too, should *conspire to keep the Law of God and sing ancestral songs of praise in the night*. Your heritage is enormously valuable, the author says, in effect: Don't lose it!

I imagine that this reading might have great resonance for the Christians in today's Egypt, who comprise about 10% of the population. Who knows when prejudice or zealotry might break out, potentially even turning them into refugees like the ancient Israelites. The same could be said of religious minorities everywhere, even in our own country.

Keeping faith over the long haul is also an issue in the second reading. We do not know who wrote this "letter" (which is really a sermon or exhortation), though, from the subject matter it must have been addressed to Jewish Christians, quite possibly in Rome.

The chapter from which this passage comes examines Jewish history through the lens of "faith." As you heard, it begins with a classical definition: *faith is the assurance of what is hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*. Then comes a series of examples, all starting with the words "by faith." From what is said about these heroes of the faith it is clear that faith is *not* an intellectual assent to a set of dogmas (as we have tended to use the term), but a reliance and trust in God that enables one to act and live in hope, into the unknown: *by faith*,

Abel offered to God an acceptable sacrifice, by faith Noah . . . , by faith Moses . . . all the way up through David and Samuel and the prophets.

What Abraham and Sarah did “by faith” is by far the longest, most meaningful section of this chapter. Not only were they the progenitors of the Jewish people, but they exemplified a call that must have seemed familiar to these recent converts to Christianity.

They were called beyond the familiar, beyond what they had grown up with. Abraham and Sarah were on a journey of faith whose goal only their descendants would live to see. They *went forth, not knowing where they were going*, living in the Promised Land *as resident aliens*, never quite at home. The author says that *they died in faith; they did not obtain what had been promised, but saw and welcomed it from afar . . . they were searching for a better country, a heavenly one.* Their descendants believe they have now found that better country, through Jesus, the Son of God.

Jewish Christians have found their spiritual home, but they still feel the poignancy of living as “resident aliens,” which, socially and politically, they still were. If the Letter to the Hebrews was indeed written in Rome, then they or their parents might have been among those deported from Rome in the year 50 AD; the Emperor Claudius ordered that the Jews be expelled because of unrest over some fellow named “Chrestus.” It seems likely that Roman officials were a little unclear about tensions between traditional Jews and Jewish Christians over “Christus.” Prisca and Aquila, Paul’s companions, were among those expelled. The church’s embrace of “resident aliens” has deep roots!

Today’s gospel story is also about keeping the faith. It starts on a very optimistic and tender note: *Fear not, little flock, for it has pleased your Abba to give you the kingdom.*

In the parable that follows, the “kingdom” turns out to be nothing grand and distant, but a *household, a home.* So we have a very significant shift in imagery. In the first reading, the Israelites “girded their loins” at the first Pass-

over so that they could make their escape from Egypt; and Abraham and Sarah journeyed to a far country, living as resident aliens. But the people in Jesus’s parable *stay put*; their “long haul” is not that of flight, or a long journey to places unknown, but of waiting patiently at home for the owner’s return.

That does not mean that they can become complacent or slack off! The servants still have to “gird their loins”—not to make their escape, but to attend to their household duties. “Gird your loins” is the literal translation, an expression so old-fashioned that we have trouble understanding it. One has to imagine oneself dressed in a long flowing garment whose excess fabric must be belted or cinched up in order to avoid tripping over it when traveling fast or engaging in physical labor. In today’s more modern translation, this phrase was expressed as *Be dressed and ready.* (I am tempted to offer another version: *don’t be caught in your pajamas*, even if the hour is late.)

When the owner returns, we have a truly astonishing statement: *the owner will gird his loins, seat them at table, and . . . wait on them.* Since when does the owner of a large household act just like the servants?! Our modern translation says the owner will *put on an apron*, which makes good sense, but we lose the exact correspondence that the gospel makes between the instruction given to the servants and the action of the returning owner. In the gospel there is complete and total mutuality between owner and servants. We are reminded, of course, of Jesus “girding himself” (same root verb) with a towel to wash the disciples’ feet. Mutual service, or servant leadership, is the hallmark of Christian living.

The gospel passage does not end here. Peter poses the question: Does this parable apply to everyone, or just the inner group? This is a question of leadership, which seems particularly relevant today. At the level of the universal church we have, in Pope Francis, a new “steward,” who we hope will prove to be (in Jesus’s words) *faithful and farsighted*, living up to his title as a “servant of the servants of God.”

At the national level, there is an important meeting this coming week of the Leadership

Conference of Women Religious. This umbrella organization, as you know, was placed under supervision by a previous regime in the Vatican. The American church, by and large, has acknowledged the sisters as *faithful and far-sighted stewards*, whose history of service has proved them worthy to manage their own household. Our thoughts and prayers are with them as they continue their journey of faith through a difficult time.

Jesus in his time, and Luke in his (around 50 years later), were realistic about religious communities and the temptations of power. As Jesus will say at the Last Supper in Luke's gospel, the disciples are not to be *like the Gentiles, whose great ones lord it over them*. Rather, *let the leader become as one who serves*. In the words of today's gospel passage, it is always easy for one in charge to think *the owner is slow in returning*; it is easy to take advantage of one's status; *to abuse the other servants*; to indulge one's own appetites, whether by *eating, drinking, and getting drunk*, or with other forms of luxury; to neglect one's duty to see that others are well cared for. For the followers of

Jesus, faithfulness over the long haul means continuing to live as a servant of one's fellow servants.

I recently happened upon a passage from *A Reflective Journal*, published by the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. The sisters, once again, offer inspiration about how to keep the faith over the long haul:

We are to be genuine disciples, who do not brush aside questions, smother doubts, and push problems away. Rather we are to look reality in the face and communicate joyful hope! . . . Joyful hope is the seedbed of resilience. . . Grateful that "memory releases energy for discipleship" we call upon those on whose shoulders we stand. May their lives, marked by joyful hope and resilience release in us the energy to navigate the shifts of our own times with trust and a spirit of adventure.

I like that spirit of adventure: Our Church of the Beatitudes would not exist without it! So with joyful hope, let us gird our loins, put on our aprons, and roll up our sleeves!