

17th Sunday of Year--Cycle A
(1 Kgs 3:5,7-12; Rom 8:28-30; Matt 13:44-52)

Many years ago I saw a cartoon that featured a wishing hat. On whomever it fell, that person became (as long as the hat remained) the person of their inmost dreams. Trouble is, it kept jumping from person to person. I only remember three characters, a boy, an old nag of a horse, and a young girl. When the hat fell on the boy, he was transformed into a knight in shining armor; when it landed on the old nag, he became a Triple Crown winner; when it landed on the girl, she was unchanged: her own good self, with no pretensions. Suppose it had landed out THERE ..? I'll leave you to think about that.

In today's first reading God promises to give Solomon whatever he asked for. Again, let us suppose that had been you? What would you have asked for? God was pleased with Solomon's choice: not asking for long life, or wealth, or the defeat of enemies, but, considering his position as king of Israel, he asked for (our translation says "an understanding heart," but literally it was for) a *leb shomea`*: "a listening heart." The Hebrew word for "heart," *leb* (l-e-b) pronounced *lev*, with the participle of *shama`*, the verb "to hear, listen," same verb as in the *shama` yisrael*, "hear, O Israel." The same word can mean both "hear" and "listen" but those terms are not identical. We hear with our ears, but we can be said to listen with our hearts. Thus Our Holy Father St. Benedict says, "Listen, my son, to the master's instruction, and attend to them with

the ears of your heart." It suggests being attentive, even sympathetic. That is what Israel expected of those who rendered judgment. Jesus expects us to bring a *leb shomea`* when He says, "Whoever has ears ought to listen." In last Thursday's gospel Jesus accused some, saying, "They hear but do not listen." Perhaps we should look to ourselves in our intercourse with others: when we hear others, do we truly listen? It's something we should try to do.

If we look at today's parable we might say that Solomon purchased the pearl of great price by asking for a listening heart rather wealth. Unfortunately, Solomon did not continue in the wisdom God gave him. He became enamored of the wealth that did come to him and it choked off God's good word in his heart. He sought more and more wealth, which came to him from his fleet of ships and the caravan trade. By modern standards he was a billionaire. He undertook great building projects: in addition to the Temple he built a palace for himself (with an ivory throne, overlaid with gold), a harem for his many wives, and a special palace for Pharaoh's daughter. He exalted Israel's military might by building chariot cities throughout the land.

Solomon did not end up well. Beguiled by his wealth and power and foreign wives, he forsook his *leb shomea`*. His ambitions exceeded his wealth and he oppressed the people through forced labor and in other ways. His policies occasioned a split in the nation that so weakened it that it fell prey to their enemies.

All this leads us to the importance of making right choices. When, at the beginning, I offered you anything you wanted, what did you choose? Riches? Fame? Beauty? Power? Or the pearl of great price? I'm sure you all made the right choice. But remember, the pearl of great price is acquired only at the surrender of everything else. More explicitly, what does the parable say, what does Jesus intend when He speaks of selling everything to acquire it? To acquire the pearl of great price means to make God's kingdom our first priority, with all other choices following from that. It is the choice of what will be of absolute value in our lives--the choice that should, in fact, condition all other choices. It means to choose the Kingdom of God above every other thing. It is the choice we make if we have a *leb shomea`*, a listening heart, a heart that listens whenever Jesus say, "Let the one who has ears listen." Actually, it means giving up little and acquiring much: Jesus promises us, "Seek first the kingdom of God and all these other things will be given to you."

Many things that conduce to our happiness may well be compatible with or even advance that main choice: choosing a spouse, accepting a new job, training ourselves in a new area of interest. Some of these relative choices may even confirm our choice of the kingdom of God, may help us to give more

effective witness to our commitment to the gospel or may put us in a better position to help other people. Other things will be seen as incompatible--seeking popularity or approval by wrong or deceptive means, looking for kicks

through the use of drugs, etc.

The suggestion at the beginning that we might be given the opportunity to choose anything we wanted, as Solomon was, is as much a fantasy as a wishing hat. But the opportunity to purchase the pearl of great price is offered to all. Not only is it offered--we are confronted with the necessity of choosing or rejecting it. In a certain sense we acquire that gift as soon as we choose it: whoever chooses God possesses God. One huge advantage of that choice is that it gives meaning and direction to everything we do. How many are there today whose lives are meaningless and directionless; how often we hear of alienation. For those who have made the right choice, life can no longer be meaningless or directionless. The second reading makes the point so beautifully: "We know that God makes all things work together for the good of those who love him. . . . Those he called he also justified; those he justified he also glorified." It is what we are all called to. With a listening heart it is what we will attain.