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Beware baggage on life's journey

By Father Albert Shamon Sunday's readings: (R3) Mark 10:17-30; (R1) Wisdom 7:7-11; (R2) Hebrews 4:12-13.

Solomon's wisdom is proverbial. So the author of the Book of Wisdom (R1) adopted Solomon as his spokesman. In describing the incomparable value of wisdom, the author uses the first person "I," putting his words in the mouth of Solomon. "I pleaded for wisdom and preferred her to accept and throne."

What is wisdom? It is God's word, revealed in the Old Testament in the law, then incarnated in the new Testament in the Word of God made flesh. Thus, the author of Hebrews could praise the vitality and the power of God's word, for in Jesus it was "living and effective and sharper than any two-edged sword" (R2).

As the word lived and was effective in Jesus, so it will be for us. If we are faithful to the word, it will bring salvation. If we are not, it will bring judgment. There is no in-between. We can fool everyone else, but never God.

The story of the rich young man in the Gospel is well known. He probably viewed Jesus as a "teacher" and only that. Yet he seeks to ingratiate himself by flattering Jesus, by addressing Him as "good"; a word devout Jews applied only to God. Jesus brusquely dismissed this obsequiousness by insisting on the priority of God. But still, His face softened and his eyes filled with love, for He saw this man to be a true searcher. Jesus loved him and wanted to free him from what was holding him back — so the sword of His words: go, sell, give to the poor, and come follow me. The eagerness of the rich young man washed out of his face, he rose, and went away sad. Jesus' face saddened too.

The man remains nameless. But he is you and I. Like the man, God's word calls us to choose. The rich young man was not happy with the choice. And we?

Does Jesus demand that we give up everything we have? Does He expect us all to become religious with vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience? Of course not! Jesus did not require Zachaeus to dispose of his entire fortune.

It is not wrong to save. It is not wrong to build up a nest egg, a la IRA. It is not wrong to provide for old age, or for one's family. Such acts are prudent.

What can be wrong is to put all of one's trust in the almighty dollar, and not in Almighty God. What can be wrong is to use wealth in

A Word for Sunday

such a way as to forget the God who gave it. Possessions are all right, provided they do not possess us. Poison in a bottle is harmless, but in the bloodstream it can destroy. So wealth is a tool. No better, no worse than any other tool — an axe, a gun, a shovel. It is as good or as bad as the person who has it.

One of the wealthiest men of all time was J. Paul Getty. He died at 83, worth between \$2 billion and \$4 billion. After his fifth divorce he told reporters, "I would give all my wealth for one successful marriage. I hate being a failure." He admitted money cannot buy happiness, and he further confessed that he believed money had some connection with unhappiness.

To keep a proper balance regarding wealth, let us never forget that it is appointed to each of us to die, and after death, to face judgment. Hearses have no U-Hauls behind them. Naked we came into the world, and naked we shall leave it. The only wealth we take with us is that which we gave away freely and cheerfully in the name of Christ.

Affluence is always a danger; it is the danger of Americans. It tends to make us trust in our own resources instead of in God. It spawns, as it has here, a secularism that sees no need for God. It deceives us into thinking that here things are more permanent than they really are. It can even bring us to believe that we can buy or earn heaven. In a word, it blocks the reception of grace. Rightly, Romans called riches impedimenta — the same word used for baggage for an army. For what baggage is to an army, riches are in the journey of life. Too much concern for baggage can cause defeat; too much concern for money can cause failure in the journey of life. To say the least, riches are an impediment.

That is why Our Lord used Oriental hyperbole about the largest Palestinian animal not being able to pass through a hole as small as the eye of a needle. What is impossible to man is possible to God. The affluent can be saved, but only with God's help. Therefore, let the rich be rich in prayer.

Remember, I am with you always

By Cindy Bassett "Where will you go now?" I asked the gentle man who stood before me on the shore of the Sea of Galilee.

"I must complete the work which my Father has given me to do," he replied. "The good news of the kingdom of God must be brought to other towns, too. That is why I have come."

As I watched Jesus climb into the boat with his apostles, I felt lonelier than I had ever been in my entire life. "Please, let me go with you!" I cried, wading into the water after them. "There is much I can do to help you, like the others who are with you always."

"No," Jesus said firmly. "You must stay here." My heart was heavy, and I was too choked up to speak. What if I never saw Jesus again? Just before the boat drifted out of earshot, Jesus called out to me, "You, too, must complete the work which has been given you. Remember, I am with you always."

Strange words, I thought. Jesus had left. How could he remain in Gerasenes with me? The only thing of which I was certain was the work I had to do. Until a few days ago, I had lived on the outskirts of town, among the dead. The tombs were the only place where the people of Gerasenes left me alone.

For years, I had been overcome by troubling spirits. Some say I was possessed by demons. I had been chained and beaten, but nothing helped until the day I met Jesus and he gave my life back to me.

Whatever had seized control of me recognized Jesus immediately as he stepped onto the shore. "What do you want with us Jesus, Son of the Most High God?" the spirits cried from within me.

"What is your name?" Jesus asked calmly. "Legion," they replied. "Do not send us down into the abyss if you must cast us out of this man. Instead, let us go into the pigs that are grazing over on the hillside!"

The next thing I was aware of was being thrown down on the ground. When I looked

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up, I saw a large herd of pigs rushing over the cliff, straight into the Sea of Galilee. The demons had gone, and I was left with a greater peace than I had ever had before in my life.

Jesus began to tell me all about his Father's kingdom and how this miracle had been done. In a short time, a large crowd had gathered near us on the beach, since the pig herders had gone into town for help. The people looked from me to Jesus, and they were even more afraid than when I was possessed by evil spirits. For this reason, they asked Jesus to leave their town.

When the people saw Jesus get back into the boat with his apostles, they left. Soon I was alone there.

It would have been easy to leave the people of Gerasenes and go on with my life in a new place. But that would have been no way to repay Jesus for all that he had done for me.

So I went back, and every day I told my story to someone else. Not all of the people believed what I said about Jesus. But many decided to become his followers, as I had. And every time someone did, I felt the presence of Jesus among us. He was still with me in a special way, just as he had promised that day on the beach.

Sometimes we can serve Jesus better in the ordinary circumstances of our lives. When we do, we too will know that he remains with us always.

Scripture reference: Luke, Chapter 8:26-39. Meditation: How can I serve Jesus in the ordinary circumstances of my life?

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