

Embracing Wisdom for Greater Life

Sts. Cornelius, pope and Cyprian, priest

Readings: 1 Tim 3:14-16

Ps 111

Lk 7:31-35

Rachel Naomi Remen, is an American Medical doctor who was a pioneer in the integration of heart and soul into contemporary medicine. She developed a special program for doctors that allowed them to engage their profession as an art of healing in the full sense of the word. In one of her books, *My Grandfather's Blessings*, she narrates this story of the oyster which I would like to share with you. We know the phrase "Pearls of Wisdom", but where do the pearls come from and why are they compared to wisdom?

"The oyster is soft, tender, and vulnerable. Without the sanctuary of its shell it could not survive. But oysters must open their shells in order to "breathe" water. Sometimes while an oyster is breathing, a grain of sand will enter its shell and become part of its life from then on.

Such grains of sand cause pain but an oyster does not alter its soft nature because of this.... It continues to entrust itself to the ocean, to open and breathe in order to live. But it does respond. Slowly and patiently, the oyster wraps the grain of sand in thin translucent layers until, over time, it has created something of great value in the place where it was most vulnerable to its pain. A pearl might be thought of as an oyster's response to its suffering....Sand is a way of life for an oyster. If you are soft and tender and must live on the sandy floor of the ocean, making pearls becomes a necessity if you are to live well."

Jesus makes a very poignant statement at the end of our gospel reading today, "Yet Wisdom is justified by all her children." Who are the children of wisdom?

In the book of Wisdom 7:28 we have these words "In every generation she passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God, and prophets; for God loves nothing so much as the person who lives with wisdom." Wisdom is fundamentally God's gift but made available to God's people. It helps us appreciate the length and the breath, the height and the depths of our lives and the things of the world in relation to the creative intention of God. Those who pursue wisdom are the friends of God, as the book of Wisdom says. We can say then that John the Baptist and Jesus are friends of God and therefore

children of wisdom. They are different in their styles of living and in their ways of inviting people to holiness, but in their mission and in the proclamation each of them invite his generation to greater life. There lies the wisdom.

A good number of their contemporaries listened to them. Most of them were at the margins of society and not necessarily at the center or at the helm; the prostitutes, sinners, tax-collectors, and a good number who left excluded from the affairs of the society, and who struggled with the burdens of the Jewish law. These are the ones who came to John for baptism and it is the same crowd that came to Jesus also and followed him. Jesus boasted in his company tax-collectors and even zealots.

But sadly there was another group that rejected the ways of wisdom, the invitation of wisdom. These will be the Pharisees and the lawyers, who refused to listen to wisdom of John and also refused to listen to the wisdom of Jesus. Their attitude towards Jesus and John the Baptist is important for us, because they show us the path that moves away from wisdom and knowing it we may refuse to take that path.

Jesus compares them with children sitting at the market place. What exactly are these children doing? Nothing really, they are just bored, bitter, they have bad temper, and they are not interested in any games. All they do is to criticize what is going on without getting interested in it. They will always have a reason to remove themselves from the show. They not interested in John the Baptist. Why? Because John the Baptist is an ascetic, long fasting and eating wild honey, he is no good, he has nothing to offer. They are not interested in Jesus. Why? Because Jesus is too lenient, drinks too much spends his time with people who are not clean, he has nothing to offer. These group of people belong to the generation that allows opportunities to slip by why they contend themselves with enjoying their little goodies of life. They fail to see the wisdom that is inviting them to greater life.

Brothers and sisters, how may we embrace wisdom for greater living? The route of wisdom, the path of wisdom calls for change, for conversion. Experiences of life, encountering the word, listening to others, even disappointments and loss, must constantly draw us to change. There are things of us that we never may get back to, experiences that have become part of us. Ours is to draw strength from it and move in a direction of hope. [As you may know I recently went home to bury my mother. I remember one of the emails I received from a Jesuit friend. He said to me, "this is a life changing experience for you"- In many ways it is and it has been. Things will not remain the same again, my

task is to learn wisdom from the change over a period of time] When we learn to change in ourselves, changes imposed on us find better anchor and meaning. One of the famous quotes of Blessed John Henry Newman, “To live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often.”

This is the wisdom behind the teaching of John the Baptist and the teaching of Jesus. They were inviting their generation to greater life and they are inviting us today to the same greater life, to perfection, to another realm of life that is more than what we have lost and hold on to. The word, “Repent” used by both of them invites us to change and embrace something greater and better. The wisdom of the oyster made manifest in the production of the pearl comes about through constant change in living under the ocean bed. If we refuse change we stop the flow of life, we stifle our life and we die before we really die. If we want to take the path of wisdom, then we must open our lives to change, to greater growth. This is what the Pharisees found it hard to accept. May we not tread that path of no change and growth.

There is another path connected with wisdom and change, and that is the path of suffering. This is the language that many do not want to hear and so prefer to stay where they are. John the Baptist knew suffering, and Jesus knew suffering, but in their suffering they came to greater life, they saw something beyond themselves. Embedded in real change is suffering. The pain of the oyster ends with the creation of a beautiful pearl that we admire, so it is with the sufferings that wisdom invites us to. It will always open up to better and more beautiful things for us in this life and in the next.

We are students and teachers of theology and Peace studies, we spend a good deal of our time in reading and writing to acquire knowledge for the future, or may be to pass exams. But I believe there is more. We are also called to pay attention to the routes we seek in life. Would that be the route of wisdom, the route of change and the route of suffering, or would it be the route of apathy, folly and regression. As we learn how to criticize we must learn also how to get involve in change. Let us embrace wisdom and let us ask the saints of today, Cornelius and Cyprian to aid us along the way to greater life.

Fr. John Ghansah, SJ