By Dianne Bergant, CSA

All of the readings for this Sunday address the theme of Wisdom. The passage from Sirach, a book that is part of the Old Testament’s Wisdom Tradition, is a collection of proverbial sayings that teach the importance of righteous living if one hopes to be successful and happy. The verses of the responsorial psalm are taken from the longest psalm in the Psalter – 176 verses, all of which extol the treasure that the Law is and point to the wisdom of those who are formed in its fundamental spirit. In the gospel reading, Jesus speaks of this spirit, insisting that it is fidelity to the spirit of the Law and not mere conformity to its letter that brings the Law to fulfilment. Law, whether actual commandments or long-accepted social custom, is very closely linked to wisdom. This is because we come to wisdom by discovering the laws or customs that reflect how life is to be lived. While certain aspects of this wisdom might be culturally determined (ex. the appropriate side of the road on which to drive), others appear to be more broadly accepted (ex. the property of others is to be respected).

It often happens that one lives in a society in which there are competing wisdoms or social customs. Paul’s admonition to the Corinthians addresses just such a situation. In it he contrasts God’s wisdom with “the wisdom of this age.” Some commentators believe the contrast is between wisdom as the rational reasoning power so valued by the Greeks, as the Corinthians were, with the Law the Jews believed came from God. While this might be the case on one level, this passage speaks of wisdom which is grounded in certain values and which manifests itself in a particular way of living. Paul may well have been criticizing the Gnostics, those who maintained that they possessed insights that far excelled the insights of others. However, there always seems to be a point of view that claims superior wisdom.

We live in a society of just such competition and claim of superior wisdom. Everyone wants to live a meaningful life, but what values determine meaningfulness? If wealth, success, and status are the standard – as is certainly the case in many instances - then cutthroat competition is the means, and financial setback, apparent mediocrity, and social anonymity are evidence of foolishness and failure. The phrase “rulers of this age” represents a frame of mind that is not limited to those in leadership positions. It insists that any differing opinion or life style is foolish, and it ridicules, marginalizes, and discriminates against them. We should not be too quick to pin such labels on those who differ from ourselves, for we too could be as guilty of such ‘misguided wisdom’ as are they.

The wisdom of God that stands in opposition to the ‘wisdom of this age’ is, according to Paul, Jesus Christ and him crucified.” According to some of the standards of our society
today, Jesus certainly appears to be foolish. He did not use his power to aggrandize himself. He embraced those whom society considered outcasts or marginalized. He was respectful to foreigners and those who held points of view different from his. He spoke honestly even when it placed him in jeopardy. Is it any wonder he did not make it in his society?

And what of us? What values, standards, social customs determine meaningfulness for us? Whose wisdom guides our lives?

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