

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

July 26, 2020

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My first image of King Solomon

When I entered elementary school, my parents gave me two books of Bible stories in Japanese: one from the Old Testament (OT) and the other from the New Testament (NT) with black and white pictures. Three years later, we were already in Argentina and I was about eleven. One day I was reading a part of that sacred history when Mom asked me if the story was interesting (*omoshiroi* in Japanese). I said yes, thinking that my mother would love my answer. I even added that it made me laugh. Then she gave me a lesson: “Does your *omoshiroi* mean arousing interest? ‘Interesting’ doesn't mean being funny enough to make you laugh, but retaining someone’s history in your memory and making you want to continue reading about it.” These words from my mother still linger in my mind.

The story I had just finished reading was King Solomon's first anecdote of the two mothers with their own babies. One of the babies dies during the night, and both mothers claim the motherhood of the living child the next day and how the king settles the matter (1 Kings 3:16-28).

Later, as a seminarian, I read several research materials about this king. One of them was the recent archaeological discoveries of the first temple built by Solomon in Jerusalem around 960 B.C.

I am sure many of you already know much about Solomon, but I would like to present my own summary of his life and his work in the history of God's people to help you broaden your biblical knowledge.

Solomon's achievements as King of Israel

Solomon was King of Israel (circa 970-931 B.C.). Son of King David and Bathsheba, Solomon was anointed as sovereign of the Hebrews and instructed on his duties by his father, to the detriment of Adonijah, his elder half-brother, who aspired to the succession to

the throne of Israel. On the death of King David, and with the support of his mother, the prophet Nathan, the general Banaiah and the high priest Zadok, Solomon eliminated his political opponents and began a reign characterized by a long period of peace and good relations with the neighboring peoples (Egypt, Arabia, Phoenicia, Edom and Damascus), during which the country experienced great economic and cultural development.

The internal security and the control of trade routes facilitated a wide expansion of the Hebrew trade, especially in horses, which were transported from Cilicia to Egypt. In addition, in order to promote commercial activity, Solomon ordered the construction of a fleet based in the port of Ezion-geber near Eloth. He consolidated Israel's political power in the region by marrying one of the daughters of the Pharaoh of Egypt and strengthening the ties of friendship with Hiram, king of the city of Tyre.

Economic prosperity allowed the monarch to build in Jerusalem the great temple that David had designed to house the Ark of the Covenant and a sumptuous royal palace. A large number of foreign craftsmen participated in the construction, such as masons and bronze workers from Tyre or carpenters from Gebal, and luxurious materials were imported from Phoenicia.

These and many other public works, as well as the expenses of the court, were covered by a heavy tax regime, supported by an administrative reform that divided the country into twelve districts, whose extension varied according to the greater or lesser fertility of the soil and the ease of access to transportation.

Towards the end of Solomon's life, however, the high tax burden and the proliferation of cults to foreign deities (Astarte, Milcom, Chemosh and Molech) caused trouble to him. Those cults brought the rebellion of ten of the twelve Hebrew tribes, all except those of Judah and Benjamin, and the subsequent division of the country into two kingdoms: that of Israel, to the north, with its capital in Shechem, and that of Judah, to the south, with its capital in Jerusalem (929 B.C.), which then followed an independent, if not hostile, evolution.

In spite of harshly reproving King Solomon's permissiveness towards the pagan practices of a good part of his women and of considering the division of Israel as a divine punishment for its idolatry, the biblical tradition has idealized the figure of the sovereign, presented as a man of great wisdom, a paradigm of consideration and justice, in various passages of the Holy

Scriptures, among which are the famous judgment of Solomon and the visit of the Queen of Sheba.

Solomon has also been credited with the authorship of various Old Testament wisdom books, such as the Song of Songs, the Book of Wisdom, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Solomon's Psalms, some of which, however, seem to have been composed well after Solomon's time.

Three short parables of the Kingdom: the hidden treasure, the fine pearl and the net with fish

The first two short parables of Jesus underline the same message. In both stories, the protagonist discovers an enormously valuable treasure: the man who discovered the treasure, discovered what he did not seek, while the pearl diver found what he did not dare to imagine. And they both react in the same way: they happily sell what they have and own the treasure or the pearl. According to Jesus, this is how those who discover the kingdom of God react.

It seems that Jesus fears that people will follow him for different reasons, without discovering what is the most attractive and important: the Father's exciting project of leading humanity towards a more just, fraternal and happy world, thus leading it towards its definitive salvation in God.

We know that the passion that animated the whole life of Jesus was to announce and promote this project of the Father: to seek the kingdom of God and his righteousness and make all people more human. The Church cannot renew herself from her roots if she does not discover the "treasure" of the kingdom of God. It is not the same thing to be called Christians to collaborate with God in his great project of making the world more human as to live centered on practices and customs that make us forget the true core of the Gospel.

Pope Francis has been telling us, "the kingdom of God calls us". This cry comes to us from the very heart of the Gospel. It is important for us to listen to that cry. Surely the most important decision we must make today in our Christian communities is to reclaim the project of the kingdom of God with joy and enthusiasm.

And finally, let us not forget that we do not enter the kingdom of God by our own merits, but that it is a gift that is offered and asks for our response. For those who are fortunate enough

to find it, a lifetime mission is given: that of laying down everything to the cause of the kingdom. Thus, the kingdom becomes the only absolute value for the one who discovers it; it is the greatest wealth for the follower of Jesus.

Note: All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition (NRSVCE).