



WE ARE CALLED TO FOLLOW THE LORD

The image of Saint Francis stripping off his clothes before the bishop of Assisi and handing them back to his father evokes many warm feelings. We picture an idealistic young man who, having been touched by God, lets go of his comfortable life as a merchant's son and embraces radical poverty and total dependence on God.

Today St. Mark presents an idealistic man in the Gospel. Seeking perfection, he asks Jesus what he has to do to gain eternal life. When Jesus tells him to give his wealth to the poor and then come follow Jesus, he becomes sad for he was wealthy. What did Francis understand that this man did not? Was the issue a matter of not being able to let go of his possessions? Was it a matter of not wanting to give to the poor? *What we do know is that the Lord is calling us to let go of our possessions, give to the poor; and follow him.*

Before we can go any farther, however, we need to ask ourselves which man we are most like. Are we more like Francis who divested himself of his possessions, gave everything to the poor and followed Jesus? Or are we more like the man in the Gospel who went away sad when he heard Jesus' words? Or are we kind of in between?

When the disciples heard Jesus' word they were astounded. Did he really mean what he said? Is it impossible for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God? Jesus had been teaching the disciples about the "kingdom" and showing them that it involves sacrifice. He had talked about his own suffering and had told them that they needed to take up the cross. He had also shown a marked tenderness for the poor and social outcasts. But Jesus' words still caught them off guard. So Jesus repeats his statement, adding the image of a camel passing through the eye of a needle. At that, the disciples were completely blown away and simply asked the obvious: *"Then who can be saved?"* *Jesus used the situation to make a very important point: Entering the kingdom of God is impossible for humans, but not for God. In other words: following Jesus requires grace.*

This is what Francis understood. Saint Francis took the gospel quite literally. He exemplifies the qualities required for entering the kingdom of God. He understood what *the kingdom* was all about and gave himself to living that vision. Our first reading assures us that wisdom is a gift. Humans cannot attain it on their own; it is something that we need to pray for. When God grants it, we need to be ready to receive it and live its ramifications. Francis was truly wise; he knew what following Jesus was all about. He had received the gift of insight and wisdom from God and put that grace into action. *He lived it.*

What was it that Francis grasped and the man in the Gospel story did not? The truth that everything is a matter of grace; everything is gift; everything we own and think that we have earned is really a gift from God. When Francis gave something to the poor, he realized that he really wasn't giving them anything; he was simply making available to them what they had a right to. *In the kingdom of God, all people are equal. Following Hebrews, Francis let the words of Jesus penetrate into the very depths of his being.* The man in the Gospel ---- and the disciples at that time --- had not yet reached that insight; they had not yet received the gift of wisdom to understand fully what "entering into the kingdom of God" was all about.

Earlier we asked ourselves which man was our model----Saint Francis or the man in the Gospel story. I suggested that maybe we follow both to some degree. If we don't have the giftedness of Saint Francis, we need to pray for it and then be ready to receive it. If we feel sad when we hear the words of the Gospel, we need to ask for the gift of detachment so that we can see things with God's eyes and be made ready to enter the kingdom of God.



I pleaded, and the spirit of wisdom came to me. All good things together came to me in her company.... Wisdom 7:7-11

Come,
Spirit of Wisdom