

31st Sunday of Ordinary Time (October 29-30, 2016)

- “The whole world before you, O Lord, is like a speck that tips the scales, and like a drop of morning dew that falls on the ground”.
- This opening line of today’s first reading from the Book of Wisdom hits you with the biggest of big questions.
- It takes me back to those cloudless nights in the country or beside a cottage lake when you look up at a sky full of stars and your head starts to spin with wonder at the universe.
- Is there life out there? How far does everything go? And where is God in all this?
- When we start thinking about time and space, we human creatures in the early 21st century are quite miniscule. Ten or twenty years seem like a long time to most of us (although I find as I get older, yesterday seems to have happened longer and longer ago). Yet, scientists now tell us that the first humans appeared about 2-3 million years ago. A million years is a long, long time. I can’t even begin to relate it to my own experience.
- So why do we even think of these things? Why not just get on with life and forget about this impossibly big picture? It is, after all, a bit of a downer.
- Well, it’s not a downer if you believe in God. In fact, it can be incredibly uplifting if you think of these things as a measure of God’s love for everything in creation.
- Now granted, the Bible is not entirely consistent in depicting God’s relationship with people. There is no shortage of passages about God’s judgment coming down on those who transgress God’s will.
- But this makes the passage from Wisdom all the more remarkable. What we seem to have in the Bible are contending views of God, or perhaps contending features that are reconciled in the concept of mercy.
- We are fast approaching the end of the Holy Year of Mercy proclaimed by Pope Francis to begin last December. It will end on the Solemnity of Christ the King on November 20.

- Mercy is about forgiveness. It does not change the wrongfulness of what someone has done; rather, it expresses openness to doing better.
- Today's reading presents God's limitless love and mercy, and the impossibility of God detesting anything God has made.
- God's love and mercy are as incomprehensible as infinity. They are also incredibly comforting and in the Gospel reading they stand as a rebuke to those who would chastise Jesus for going to stay at the house of the chief tax collector.
- Tax collectors in Jesus's day were, if anything, even more despised than they are today. They typically used their positions of power to cheat people and skim off something for themselves.
- Who could have believed that one of them would reform his ways, give half of his possessions to the poor and refund four times as much to those he had defrauded.
- Jesus did.
- And who knows whether Zacchaeus did all the things he promised to do. The point is that Jesus was prepared to accept his promises. He did not give up on Zacchaeus.
- There is a powerful lesson here. In this day and age of disposable everything and planned obsolescence, it is very easy to give up on things, to give up on people.
- It's why our landfill sites are bulging with refuse and why the death penalty for major crimes is so popular in many countries around the world, including our big neighbour to the south.
- Not giving up on something or someone takes time and effort. And it's often difficult to understand. But I have learned from many people, including my father, how it is worth the effort.
- My father seldom if ever gave up on things or people. He had an extensive collection of water pumps at our cottage. When one would fail, he would go out and find another, but he would not throw out the one that failed. And then, when the new one failed, he would retrieve the first one from the shed and see if by some miracle a few years in the shed has rehabilitated the pump, or perhaps given him some new insights

on how to get it running again. And sometimes it did. And so it continued. Musical pumps.

- My father also did not give up on people. He was a high school teacher who taught what were called commercial subjects in his day – business in today’s parlance. His students were not academic high-achievers, but rather those who would find clerical or secretarial work after they finished high school. His patience with them was limitless, and it was more often than not rewarded with some success that had previously seemed beyond their grasp.
- I am now following a similar path as a teacher at the University of Ottawa. Most of the students I teach are very high achievers, but not all. And yet, if there is one thing I find rewarding about my teaching, it is when a student who did not do at all well on a first assignment comes to me for help and then succeeds the next time around. There is nothing like it in terms of the satisfaction and sense of accomplishment I feel.
- And, in some very small way, I can relate to what must go on with God and the universe. God never gives up on us, no matter how bad things get.

JMK