

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

Fr. Samuel Springuel

30 July, 2023

1st Reading 1 Kings 3:5,7–12

Responsorial Psalm Psalm 119:57,72,76–77,127–128,129–130

2nd Reading Romans 8:28–30

Gospel Matthew 13:44–52

Popular culture is replete with cautionary tales about the power of wishes. Wishes can change your life, and so you must be very careful about what you wish for. Wish for the right thing, and your life will become immensely better. Wish for the wrong thing, and your life could be ruined.

One particular version of this archetypal story that I remember from my childhood is Disney's version of Aladdin. With younger brothers who would watch Disney movies on repeat, I could hardly avoid having it seared into my mind.

Aladdin's first wish is a trick: he doesn't actually make a wish. He's trapped in a cave after a cave-in and very clearly needs to get out. However, he never actually says the magic words "I wish to be out of this cave," but rather tricks the genie into taking the initiative. As a result, he gets this fairly simple wish without much in terms of complications or backlash. Really, as something of a bonus.

Aladdin's second wish, his first official wish, is to be a prince. Earlier in the movie he had met the Princess Jasmine when she had snuck out of the palace, and developed a bit of a crush on her. Knowing that a humble street beggar would never be allowed into the palace, let alone to court the Princess, Aladdin seeks to change his circumstances to give himself the chance to win the love of the Princess. At first this wish goes rather well, "Prince Ali," with his princely dress and entourage, is welcomed into the Palace, speaks to the Sultan, and gets permission to court the Princess. However, as he does so, he finds out that Princess Jasmine isn't really interested in Prince Ali, or any prince for that matter. All those princely trappings may have gotten Aladdin into the Palace, but they are of no use in getting into Princess Jasmine's heart. To do that, he has to shed the disguise and show her his true self.

Once the disguise starts to slip, however, he becomes vulnerable. The power hungry vizier, Jafar, wants to become Sultan, and thus has plans afoot to marry Princess Jasmine himself. Seeing in Prince Ali a rival for power (Jafar cares not at all about Jasmine's heart), he has the prince kidnapped and thrown into the sea to kill him. This forces Aladdin to make use of his second official wish: to save his life. Since his status as a prince was gained by a wish, it can only be maintained by the same power.

Such a display of power, however, was difficult to hide, and Jafar caught sight of Aladdin's lamp in the aftermath. He now knew that "Prince Ali" was an imposter and immediately made plans to steal the source of Ali's power: the lamp. Once the lamp is in his possession, Jafar is able to fulfill his ambition to become Sultan the easy way, simply by wishing it. He is Sultan in name only, however, unable to command respect from those whom he rules. This leads to Jafar's second wish, to be the most powerful sorcerer in the world. If people will not respect him, then they will fear him.

Even this, however, is not enough. Despite, quite literally, being able to make people *do* what he wants them to do, he cannot make them *feel* what he wants them to feel. As the most powerful sorcerer in the world, Jafar's rule as Sultan is undisputed, but he still craves legitimacy. To that end he still wishes to marry Jasmine, and thereby legitimize his rule. Jasmine, however, will have nothing of it and Jafar, powerful as he is, powerful as the genie he commands is, is powerless to command her feelings.

Taking advantage of this desire for legitimacy, and of Jafar's insatiable desire for power, Princess Jasmine and Aladdin are able to trick Jafar into making his third and final wish: to be a genie himself. This proves to be his undoing, for while genies may have "phenomenal cosmic power," they are also bound, slaves of whomever holds their lamp: "itty-bitty living space," in the words of the movie. Jafar, therefore, has unwittingly bound himself to a life of servitude.

In the aftermath of this final confrontation, Aladdin regains control of his original lamp, giving him the opportunity to once again become a prince. Instead, however, Aladdin chooses to use his third and final wish to fulfill a promise he made to the genie back when he first met him and wishes for the genie's freedom, giving up his chance of marrying Princess Jasmine. Having witnessed now Aladdin's bravery in confronting Jafar, his wit in devising the means to overcome what should have been an insurmountable obstacle, and his magnanimity in using his final wish for the sole benefit of another, the Sultan relinquishes his desire to see Princess Jasmine married to a prince, and grants her and Aladdin permission to marry (a process which, in fine Disney style, takes two more movies).

While it is never spelled out anywhere, Disney's Aladdin has a very coherent message about the nature of wishes. Wishes that are made to benefit oneself have a way of backfiring, of being corrupted into something that is ultimately hurtful. Wishes that are made for the benefit of others, however, don't just come true, but create ripples which spread and improve the lives of all around them. Think about it, the most successful wish is Aladdin's final wish. The genie's freedom doesn't have any direct benefit for Aladdin, indeed it promises to ruin his chances with Jasmine, and yet it is that action, more than anything, which convinces the Sultan that Aladdin is a worthy suitor for his daughter, politics be damned. By contrast, the wish that goes most badly is Jafar's final wish which turns him into a genie: granting him almost unlimited power, and binding him as a slave at the same time. Every other wish falls somewhere in the middle ground between these two. The more the wish is for the benefit of the person making the wish, the more it goes wrong in the end. Even Aladdin's trick wish can be interpreted in this way. Aladdin gets out of the cave with very little complication not because he wishes for it, or rather precisely because he doesn't wish for it. As a result of some fast talk, and the genie's sense of humor, the wish effectively becomes the genie's wish for Aladdin instead of Aladdin's wish for himself.

At this point, most of you are probably asking what all this has to do with today's readings. Am I indulging in a random walk down memory lane, or do I actually have a point? Well, if you recall, in the first reading Solomon is essentially granted a wish. "Ask something of me and I will give it to you," God says to Solomon. Further, Solomon's wish, I believe, fits into the schema that Disney's Aladdin lays out quite well. Solomon, new to the job of being king, wishes for "an understanding heart" that he might "judge [God's] people and distinguish right from wrong." In so much as this wish is not for Solomon's own benefit, it is pleasing to God and he grants Solomon's wish, as we just heard. If we continue reading the first book of Kings, however, we will discover that the story is a bit more complicated than that. Early on he uses the "understanding heart" that God granted him to rule God's people and build His temple, and things go well for him and the Kingdom of Israel in those years. Later in life, however, the success that Solomon had in his youth goes to his head and he begins to use God's gift to multiply his own wealth and power. As a result, at the time of his death, there is so much resentment of his rule in the north, that the Kingdom divides, with most of it being torn away from Solomon's son and successor. Within this one wish, if not this one reading, we see both ends of the schema that Disney's Aladdin lays out being demonstrated.

So what about us? Most of us have never had God come to us in a dream and say "Ask something of me and I will give it to you." However, every one of us has prayed to God to ask for something, made a petition. We do it every time we come to Mass in what is called sometimes the Universal Prayer, sometimes the Prayer of the Faithful, sometimes the Bidding Prayers, but often, simply, the Petitions. In a sense we are making wishes in these these prayers, asking God for something, and if they are well written it is something for someone else. But even in the best such prayers, our own desires often tinge what we ask for. We pray for people we know, and ask for solutions to their problems that fit our own definition of "solution." The stories of Aladdin and Solomon suggest, however, that we should strive to wish purely for the good of the recipient, not anything for ourselves. As St. Benedict says in his rule: "No one is to pursue what he judges better for himself, but instead, what he judges better for someone else."

This is not easy. Our own needs and desires are always front and center in our attention, while the needs and desires of others must be ferreted out. If we're lucky, they will tell us directly, but most of the time we have to try and think like other people, imagine ourselves in their shoes, in order to figure out what they might want or need. What we all need is that understanding heart that Solomon asks for and the grace to use it wisely, in service of others. Then, perhaps, we will pray as we ought.