

Store up treasures above

18th Sunday of the Year – Cycle C – 4 August 2019

Readings: Eccl 1:2; 2:21-23; Col 3:1-5; 9-11; Lk 12:13-21

“Vanity of vanities, the Preacher says. Vanity of vanities! All is vanity!” (Ecclesiastes)

Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. The author of the Book of Ecclesiastes—who calls himself ‘Teacher’ and ‘the son of David, king in Jerusalem’—raises issues that are insoluble and provides insights to those seeking wisdom. In those times, it was not uncommon for writers to find common cause with some wise elder. In this case, by identifying himself as ‘son of David’ the author links himself to the wise king, Solomon. The main point he stresses is: ‘In vain do we labour for what perishes’. Ecclesiastes is certainly not the ‘good news’ book of the Bible; rather, it can be considered a book of ‘bad news’ for those who place their hope in the perishable. It echoes and reechoes a stark message: vanity of vanities, all is vanity! All of human life is ultimately meaningless if viewed in itself, apart from God. To prove his point, he cites the example of an industrious and intelligent man who works very wisely to generate wealth. Yet, sadly, after all his toils, tears and trials, death will force him to leave behind all his hard-earned wealth to be enjoyed by someone else who had not even lifted a finger to acquire it. After restless days, toiling relentlessly in order to earn more, “even in the night his mind does not rest.” Isn’t that sheer folly? Vanity of vanities; all is vanity, indeed!
2. The gospel reading reinforces the theme of the folly and vanity of storing up wealth without reference to God and other people, especially the needy. The parable of the ‘rich fool’ is found only in the gospel according to Luke. Jesus narrates the parable in response to an apparently wealthy man’s request to him to arbitrate in a dispute involving dividing of family inheritance. Jesus takes the opportunity to catechize the crowd, sensing in this request hidden greed for wealth. The ‘rich fool’ of the parable lives his life without reference to God and is stuck in the web of meaninglessness – vanity of vanities! He neither “seeks the things that are above” [see 2nd reading] nor strives to store up eternal treasures by his works of mercy and a life of virtue. Rather, he is obsessed with bringing down his small barns and building bigger barns for a life packed with pleasure, and powered by the consumeristic: “relax, eat, drink and be merry; for tomorrow you shall die!” principle.
3. God is the one who makes the rich dreamer’s dreams come crashing down by saying: “You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” Here we hear an echo of the wealthy worker in the first reading. The folly of the rich fool is neither that he has money nor that he labours hard to earn more wealth, but that he is like “those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God” (v.21). Rather than turn to God, his Treasure, this fool turns his treasure into his god. He adores wealth and plans to live a long life solely to relax, eat, drink and make merry. Little does he realize that his lifespan is not in his hands but in God’s Hand. God, and other people, did not feature anywhere in his planning. The whole and sole of his focus was: I, me, myself, for me, etc.

Linking the 2nd Reading to the Theme:

In the second reading Paul advises the Colossians: “Seek the things that are above!” In last Sunday’s reading they were reminded that they are ‘new creatures’ since they died with Christ, in baptism, and rose with him. Thus, by exhorting them to look upward, so to say, Paul doesn’t mean that they must escape from this world and live in some imaginary, illusionary dreamland. Rather, he does exhort them to live a qualitatively exalted existence here-and-now that will culminate in heaven. Paul says: “You have clothed yourselves with the new self” and therefore You-We-I must be conformed to Christ who builds all people into a community without any distinctions.

An Echo of the Theme in the Psalm (90):

The psalm compares and contrasts God’s eternity vis-à-vis human infirmity. The response is an acknowledgement of God’s solidity and dependability: “O Lord, you have been our refuge from one generation to the next.” By contrast, human beings are like a dream, like grass—springing up silently and then fading away. It also contains a plea consonant with the theme: “Make us know the shortness of our life that we may gain wisdom of heart” (v.12).

Three Voices from Tradition:

St John Chrysostom (347-407) in *‘On Wealth and Poverty’*: “Our use of earthly and natural goods must be oriented toward higher and spiritual goods. Another way of saying this is that our desires and consumption must be rightly ordered. Let us accustom ourselves to eat only enough to live, not enough to be distracted and weighed down. For we were not born, we do not live, in order to eat and drink; but we eat in order to live.”

St John Marie Vianney (1786-1859), *whose feast falls this Sunday, August 4*: “You either belong wholly to the world or wholly to God.” You cannot serve both God and Mammon.

Pope Francis (during a Q & A session in a talk to Jesuit schools on June 7, 2013): “Poverty in the world is a scandal. In a world where there is so much wealth, so many resources to feed everyone, it is unfathomable that there are so many hungry children, that there are so many children without an education, so many poor persons. Poverty today is a cry. We all have to think if we can become a little poorer, all of us have to do this. How can I become a little poorer in order to be more like Jesus, who was the poor Teacher?”

Reflection: The readings today challenge me to ask: Which idols do I adore? Bank balance? Body? Brains? Beauty? Do I “seek the things above” with my heart turned towards God and my whole being sensitive to the poor around me? Am I aware that, ultimately, I’ll have to leave back all I’ve hoarded up for myself? St. Paul writes: “We brought nothing into the world, just as we shall not be able to take anything out of it” (1 Tim 6:7).

In Lighter Vein:

A Franciscan and a Jesuit were visiting a village when they came across a river. The Jesuit convinced the Franciscan to carry him across since the latter was barefooted and poorly dressed. The Franciscan agreed, lifted the Jesuit up and began to wade through. Halfway through, the Franciscan asked, “Father, do you have any money in your pocket?” The Jesuit replied, “Yes, only five hundred rupees!” The Franciscan dropped him instantly and cried, “I’m sorry! We’re not allowed to carry money!” Money often becomes god for priests and religious with a vow of poverty. Thus, it’s important that I constantly ask myself: Am I storing up riches in heaven?
