

The 18th Sunday of Year C: Where our priorities ought to lie.

First Reading: Ecclesiastes 1:2+2:21-23: Vanity of Vanities! All is vanity!

Second Reading: Colossians 3:1-5+9-11: Getting spiritual priorities right;

Gospel: Luke 12:13-21: Parable of Rich Fool; but where did he go wrong?

If I were an advertising executive for ITV, Channels 4 or 5, or Sky TV, I would have wished that the author of Ecclesiastes had been strangled at birth. (Don't tell the bishop...) 'Ecclesiastes' means a preacher in the public assembly ('ekklesia' in Greek – hence our modern word 'ecclesiastical' for church affairs). Many think that the book was written after the end of the Jews' exile in about 538 BC. Whatever its origin, the writer could not have been a bundle of fun. His basic theme is that things we judge important (eg, knowledge, wealth, love, even life itself) are often pointless, ending in senility and death. All we can do, he argues, is to accept what we get as God's will, make the best of it, and ultimately prepare for death. At a flippant level, this approach does not do much for TV adverts trying to persuade us to spend £30,000+ on a new electric car, or to insure it through those blasted meercats. On a serious note, it does remind us of the bleakness of his outlook: he had no belief in any sort of life after death. In his own limited way, the author was right: without God or eternity, much (but not all) of what we do on this earth can seem pointless.

In the second reading (two bits of Colossians 3), St Paul offers a far more positive approach than that given 500 years earlier by the "preacher" in the first reading. This is because Paul is convinced both by the fact of Jesus' resurrection (and so, by the idea of life after death for us), and by the belief that that we share in that risen life already. He calls this process "being brought back to 'true' life with Christ". The upshot of this is that, while still living here on earth, we should also think of spiritual things. Just as the "preacher" had a rather world-weary cynicism about the meaningless of much of human effort, Paul has the opposite. For him, our human behaviour matters a lot, because he believes we "have put on a new self which will progress towards true knowledge, the more it is renewed in the image of its creator." Put more simply, he means that, while we need to live our lives here, we should also have an eye for the spiritual – being aware that there is more to life than just the body and what makes it grow and flourish. This reflects one of the age-old aspects of religion: that how we behave is one of the ways we worship God. Among those aspects of behaviour, Paul stresses that we should avoid greed (in the money-grabbing, not the over-eating sense) – as it is "the same thing as worshipping a false God."

We now turn to the gospel. What provoked Jesus' parable was a question by a man asking him to become involved in a family row about inheritance. (People would often ask rabbis to help settle disputes.) Unusually, Jesus seemed annoyed, and gave the parable to make a point about obsession with wealth - or greed - as we've just mentioned. I won't repeat the parable fully, but it dealt with a successful farmer who, to store safely a bumper harvest, decided to build bigger barns for his crop. This would strike most of us as sensible – as it would have seemed to Jesus' audience. The problem was the farmer's attitude: he thought to himself, "My soul, you have plenty of good things laid by for years to come; take it easy; eat, drink and be merry..." Jesus criticized the farmer for being both presumptuous (he did not consider the possibility of ill-health or death) and self-obsessed (he never thought of sharing any of his good fortune with those less lucky). The man died that night, and others would inherit his hoard. In the text, the farmer was described as a "fool" – meaning an 'idiot' in our sense. But that's a fairly mild insult – in reality, he was totally self-centred.

This raises a question that won't go away (especially for priests): what should be our moral stance on riches and wealth? The issue affects everyone reading these notes, but full-time religious must ask it of themselves seriously. Some years ago, a parishioner of mine said that clergy should live at "the average level" for the parish where they were stationed. This would mean being more comfortable than some parishioners, but also a lot less than others. It would also mean that priests in different parishes would have different levels of comfort. I don't know the answer to this, but in these difficult times, the problem won't go away. On the one hand, parishes cannot be run without buildings and equipment (especially the modern electronic sort); on the other, over-provision and luxury already cause scandal and put people off the Church.

Some of you will have teenagers who fret about the planet and global warming (quite rightly) – but who also consume much electricity & resources! They often say they have now given up formal religion, but we should tell them: (1) the Pope urges us to care for the environment – and that means reining-in our consumption; (2) the moral problem of avarice/greed is stressed in these 3 readings. I suggest that we think about two sentences from this Sunday's Mass: "A man's life is not made secure by what he owns, even when he has more than he needs." (Jesus in the gospel) and: "O that today you would listen to his voice; harden not your hearts!" (The response to the alternative psalm) *Fr Jim Dunne.*