

This Sunday's Readings – the 18th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Today's readings center on material wealth and how one should not solely depend on material possessions.

The first reading is from the Book of Ecclesiastes, which is one of the seven Wisdom books of the bible. The word Ecclesiastes is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word Qoheleth, who is identified in Chapter 1, verse 1 as the son of King David. However, in the bible there is no mention that King David had a son named Qoheleth. So who is he? Qoheleth comes from the Hebrew word *gahal*, which means "one who convokes an assembly" and the book itself is a treatise "on the vanity of all things". The word vanity literally means "breath" or "vapor". It is estimated to have been written sometime during the 3rd century BCE. In short, Qoheleth was the literary name of some teacher of wisdom, whose name we do not know. According to Qoheleth, God has a plan for all of us but that plan is hidden and man tries to find happiness here on earth but never finds it, no matter how much material wealth he attains. The entire book is quite pessimistic, for Qoheleth considers "everything under the sun" as vanity. That pretty much sums up this particular reading. Even after one rejects material wealth and devotes his/her life to the study of wisdom and knowledge, one still will not attain happiness. Reginald H. Fuller in his *Preaching the Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today* adds this comment – "Ecclesiastes is not one of the most loved books of the Bible. In fact, we may sometimes wonder why it is in the canon at all. But with that taste for shocking paradox that was characteristic of him, Sir Edwyn Hoskyns used to say that Ecclesiastes is the most Christian book in the Old Testament! What he meant was that Ecclesiastes is a ruthless exposure of what human life is apart from God and, if taken really seriously, prepares the way for a hearing of the gospel of Christ. Ecclesiastes is not so much good news as it is the bad news that has to be heard before the good news becomes audible. "Vanity of vanities"—all of human life is ultimately futile and meaningless if viewed in itself, apart from God".

Jesus takes this much further in today's Gospel reading from Luke. It should be noted that the Parable of the Rich Fool is unique only to Luke. Like Qoheleth, Jesus also speaks out against those who rely solely on material wealth. However, it must be understood that Jesus is not speaking out against those who have attained wealth but only against those who rely solely on that wealth. He is also warning us not to be entrapped by the lure of material wealth as the sole source of happiness. To be truly happy, one must seek a treasure that is far more valuable than any material possession – the Kingdom of God. Fr. Roger Karban in his 2007 syndicated column summarizes today's readings – "'Take care to guard against all greed," Jesus warns the person who wants him to mediate a family dispute." "Though one may be rich, one's life does not consist of possessions." Jesus illustrates his point with a parable about a person so obsessed with wealth that he overlooks his own mortality. The words Jesus pronounces over this rich, but unfortunate individual have echoed down through the centuries. "You fool, this night your life will be demanded of you; and the things you have prepared, to whom will they belong? Thus will it be for all who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich in what matters to God." Though our sacred authors expect us to "make a living," they're concerned that doing so not stop us from living. God working in our lives through those

around us is too valuable an experience to be ignored. Nothing should ever block our vision of that reality”.

John J. Pilch, in his *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle C* adds these cultural comments on today’s Gospel reading – “Bible readers are very familiar with stories of enmity between brothers in ancient Mediterranean families: Jacob and Esau (Genesis 27); Joseph and his eleven brothers (Genesis 37). Inheritance was often a key cause of the enmity. The brothers praised in Psalm 133:1 for living together in unity illustrate the situation where a father died and did not specify a division of the inheritance. According to Roman law, a division of inheritance was required only if *both* parties wanted it. Judaic law allowed the division on the petition of a single son (see Luke 15:12), but it was shameful because it effectively expressed the wish that the father were already dead.

JESUS THE MEDIATOR

In today's story Jesus is invited to be a mediator, a very difficult but highly honorable role in this culture. Conflicts can easily escalate to blood feuds that no one wants. The key role of the mediator is to head off the blood feuds. The role is honored and advocated in the Matthean Beatitudes (5:9) “Truly worthy of esteem, truly honorable are the *peacemakers* for they will be considered God-like.” Ideally the mediator is a kinsperson at least five links removed from the disputing parties. Above all, the mediator should be a person who, because of personality, status, respect, wealth, influence, or other characteristics, can create in the litigants a willingness to conform with his decision. Jesus responds to the honorable invitation in two ways. First, he adopts the customary role of cultural humility. Paying and receiving compliments is dangerous in this culture. Jesus protects himself against envy and the evil eye by his feigned humility: “Friend, who set me to be judge or arbitrator over you?” Second, Jesus gives the real reason for his refusal. He suspected he was being drawn into a conflict driven by greed.

THE PARABLE AND GREED

In Jesus' parable about the man with the bumper crop, God is not pleased with his plan to “save for the future” in bigger barns. God calls this man a fool! The man deserves God's judgment. The man is clearly a landowner, a minuscule minority in Jesus' world. He appears to live on his land and share in the work of the land. When he realizes the magnitude of his crops, he plans to tear down his barns and build bigger ones. But his “future planning” is condemned by God and even by the words of the fool himself. “You have ample goods laid up for many years,” said the fool. “Relax, eat, drink, and be merry” (v. 19). He stores for future lean years, but not simply for his own pleasure. When the village smallholders have to come to him and borrow grain, he will charge an exorbitant price in hopes of confiscating even more land for himself. What should the fool have done? The same anyone else in that position should have done: distribute the surplus to others, immediately. The lucky landowner was in a good position to become a “patron” to select even more clients, or simply to be beneficent. He might have done

what Jesus praised the shrewd steward for doing (Luke 16:1-9): using surplus wealth as a means to gain friends so that when the wealth is gone, the friends will remain and repay the kindnesses, as this culture expects. Our ancestors never fail to challenge us

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