

JESUS WARNS US ABOUT THE DANGER OF MATERIAL WEALTH

Reflection for the 18st Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle C

In today's gospel, someone in the crowd seeks the help of Jesus in an inheritance dispute: "*Teacher tell my brother to share the inheritance with me.*" Jesus refuses to be drawn into the dispute. Instead he gives a homily on the danger of material riches. He says:

*Take care to guard against all greed,
For though one may be rich
One's life does not consist of possessions.*

Then Jesus seeks to emphasize his point with a parable about a rich man who was not satisfied with his wealth. He wanted more. He decides to build bigger barns.

Jesus calls the rich man a "fool" - pretty strong language. The rich man wasn't a fool because of his wealth per se, he was a fool and condemned by Jesus because of his failure to generously share his wealth. There is a world of a difference between the "generous rich" and the "greedy rich". The "greedy rich" are fools in Jesus eyes. The "generous rich" are good examples of people who know how to manage well God's gifts and thereby "to store up a treasure for themselves in heaven."

In today's gospel, Jesus strongly emphasizes the importance of working to store up a treasure in heaven or working to be rich in the eyes of God. We can be certain that one thing that will make us rich in the eyes of God is a spirit of generosity. God is totally generous. The generosity of God was made flesh in the life of Jesus. In turn, Jesus sacrificed all that we may enjoy eternal life.

The rich man was a fool because he missed the whole point of his riches. Material riches whether inherited or worked for are given to us so that we can be a blessing to others who are less fortunate. Commenting on today's gospel Fr. Vima Dison S.J. tells about a group of well to do business people in Washington D.C. who are involved in a *Ministry of Money*. The group meets regularly to see how they should invest their money in a way that will benefit the less fortunate members of society. One of their investments involved giving money to research the causes of diseases amongst poor people - one area usually neglected by large pharmaceutical companies because there is no money in it. We can be sure that was a good way of storing riches in the sight of God.

Commenting on today's Gospel, Patricia Sanchez writes:

*In his book entitled **The Paradox of Success: When Winning at Work Means Losing at Life**, John O'Neil shares one of his early experiences in climbing up the corporate ladder. "One of my perks," writes O'Neil, "was a company car, and I was inordinately proud of this badge of success...and what's a perk without some strutting? I wanted my driver to be a friendly admirer, part of my supportive audience. However, no matter how much I tried to chat with him, he remained distant...cool.*

"Finally I asked him if there was a problem...He tried to duck the question but eventually responded with classic New York directness...'All you seem to think about or do is work, and it doesn't even look like you enjoy yourself. I guess you're nice enough, but frankly, from my point of view, your life is real boring.'"

Like the rich man featured in the Lucan Jesus' parable, O'Neil had become so mired in the mechanics of material acquisition, he had lost his perspective. Happily for him, he regained it; unhappily for the parable's protagonist, he did not. Corporate perks and large, well-stocked grain bins do not travel well through the passage from this transitory world to eternity.

Money and power can imprison and inhibit just as effectively as barred windows and iron chains. 'Set a bird's wings with gold and it will never fly.' (Tagore)

Some people have had to go to prison to discover how little we can get by with, and what extraordinary spiritual freedom and peace that can bring. It frees us to develop the spirit. 'People don't know what they are striving for. They exhaust themselves in the senseless pursuit of material things, and die without realizing their spiritual greatness.' (Solzhenitsyn)

'People,' said the Little Prince, 'rush about in express trains, but they do not know what they are looking for. They raise ten thousand roses in the same garden, and they still do not know what they are looking for. Yet what they are looking for could be found in a single rose.' When we distinguish between our needs and our wants, we will be surprised to realize how little is enough.

Tithing: God's way to help us grow in generosity and to curb greedy tendencies

One very concrete sign that we are growing spiritually is that we are becoming more generous with our time, talent and treasure. A true faith perspective towards life sees *"all as gift"*. All I have comes from the loving hands of a generous God:

- The precious gift of time
- My talents , skills and natural gifts
- My material resources

The more we develop inner eyes that see all as gift, the more we grow in the sense of biblical stewardship that calls us to:

- Develop and grow the gifts God has given to us.
- Use them responsibly to bless the communities we belong to.

When it comes to the money aspect of stewardship (the focus of today's gospel), each of us is invited to look into our hearts and check books to see how well we manage and share the material blessings of our lives.

- We might ask how close are we to tithing 10% or more of our income and how we use the other 90%?
- How much monthly income do we think we would need before we would consider tithing? Many people with a rather large income do not tithe. They probably say that they cannot afford to.

It is interesting to note that Jesus often spoke about our use and management of material things, about greed and materialism. He spoke more about them than about sexual sins, the Sabbath and prayer. If we had lived in his time, we may have asked: "Why does Jesus talk about money and material things so often? Why doesn't he speak about spiritual things?" Obviously, for Jesus the way we handle our money and material resources is a very spiritual matter. Wrong use of material blessings could endanger our eternal salvation-as we see in today's gospel.

Fr. Eugene Hensell writes: *The teaching of Jesus about material possessions is based on his keen insight of how deceptive they can be. Possessions have a way of exercising power over the one claiming to possess them. No one can ever have enough possessions to provide the kind of security that the human heart seeks. Before long a subtle dynamic of reversal takes place and our possessions begin to possess us. To paraphrase Jesus, our possessions take over our heart and they become the center of our lives (Mt 6:21). We give them a sense of ultimate value that should be given only to God.*

Last Will & Testament: Planning your *Last Will & Testament* is a wonderful opportunity for us to be a good and responsible steward of God's blessings. As with all our spending, our *Last Will & Testament* is a theological statement about what is really important to us. For the vast majority of us, our *Last Will & Testament* is our best opportunity to give a big gift to worthy causes and to our church family. Recently, a lady told me that she had just revised her Will to include a 10% gift to an organization that helps the poor. I was happy to hear that. Recently, I revised my Will to include charitable organizations *and* to include my church family at Ascension. I have enclosed a letter in my Will to ask that my siblings and nephews and nieces donate 10% of whatever they receive to the poor. I feel sure no one has

told them that they should do this. I am hoping my Will will be a teaching moment for all who receive a gift-no matter how small.

Parish Tithe

A growing number of parishes throughout the country either tithe 10% of their offertory to the poor or are moving in that direction as is the case with our parish. As with our personal budget, it is not an easy decision. My guess is that lots of parishes like ours do not tithe because they say "We can't afford it. We have too many needs of our own." And believe you me when it comes to budget time at our parish, I struggle a lot with the tithe issue. As with personal finances, I am very tempted to dip into tithe money. But then I think if our parish can't afford to tithe, what parish can? I ask the same question I ask with personal finances: How much income would we need in order to tithe?

Budgets - a theological statement

It has been well said that budgets (both personal and parish) are a theological statement. They are an expression of what we truly believe, they express our priorities. For example, we may *say* that concern for the poor is important in our personal lives or in the life of the parish, but if that concern is not reflected in the way we use our time, treasure and talent, our words are empty and without substance.

For our Reflection

- To what extent do we think we are using and managing our finances in such a way that will gain us a treasure in heaven?
- If we are not intentional givers to our church and the poor, what hinders us from moving in that direction?
- Do you believe that personal and parish budgets are theological statements?
- Have you considered remembering the poor and your church family in your *Last Will & Testament*?