

## EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

In today's Gospel (Luke 12:13-21) a man asks the Lord Jesus to intervene in a family dispute about inheritance, as though our Lord were some sort of worldly judge. Jesus' response, in effect, is "I don't care who inherits the property. I truly don't care. I do care who gets to Heaven."

The Lord Jesus did not come into this world to resolve inheritance disputes. He came into this world to liberate the human race from sin. Now, the Lord's work of liberating us from sin consists of a Sacrifice and an Example. The Sacrifice was made on the Cross, as He offered Himself to the Father on behalf of the entire human race, taking upon Himself all of our sins, piled up and stinking, from Adam and Eve to the end. The Example He gave by His way of life, which included not worrying about wealth. We know that He and the Apostles had a common fund, so it is not true to say, with some of the nuttier of the early Franciscans, that He never dealt with money or even touched a coin. His example was not the suspicious one of regarding money as somehow poisonous. His example was the faithful and charitable one of regarding money as something not to worry about or fight about.

Don't fight about it, says Jesus to the doubtless shocked man who complains about not getting his proper share of some inheritance. Jesus says, in effect, "You want to fight your brother over the inheritance, and you want me to take sides in the fight. I won't take a side. I will tell you that it is better for you not to get part of what you think you have coming to you than to fight your brother".

Don't worry about it, Jesus says to all of us. Some attention must be paid to money but, in the end, you really can't take it with you. In the end, the Lord reminds us, what matters is our Faith and Love. These, and not wealth, are our passport into heaven.

Pastors, funeral home directors, and attorneys, have all witnessed what sometimes happens to families after a death. They have all witnessed people saying, with varying degrees of bitterness, that they aren't getting what they should have coming to them. Sometimes they go to court, which usually makes things worse for everyone involved except the attorneys. People who started out disliking each other end up truly hating each other, by the time an adversarially structured court system has worked its weird, expensive magic. They would have been much better off had they heard Jesus say "Take care to guard against all greed," including the particularly treacherous greed that poses as a desire for justice.

Truly. I have known cases where, after a dispute regarding a will, brothers are incapable of being in the same room with each other, and will not tolerate their children having any contact with their cousins. Imagine a lady whose hard working, successful husband died, leaving behind considerable money, but also an ambiguous will that generated a nasty lawsuit that made it impossible for decades for that lady's children to be together with their mother. She lost her husband and her family, her husband to death and her family to greed. What would have happened if one brother had said about the inheritance, "Fine - whatever." Imagine both saying, "Fine - whatever"!

The Lord Jesus' superficially shocking response, very nearly "Frankly, my friend, I don't care" is actually the wisest one, of course. What matters is getting into Heaven, and that is all about Faith and Love. The Lord warns the angry brother, and us, that fighting about money and property, even when we think we're in the right, can destroy Faith and Love.

To say "You fool" is a harsh rebuke, but the Bible uses it occasionally. "The Fool says in his heart, 'There is no God,'" warns Psalm 14:1. The ultimate stupidity is denying the existence of God, and relying on wealth rather than God for our happiness is a form of denying His existence. "The Fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction" (Proverbs 1:7) The rich man in today's Gospel parable is a fool for not having learned the heavenly teaching about the danger of greed and the supreme importance of Faith and Love.

Most people have seen things similar to what I have described. Both Sacred Scripture and our personal observations testify to the corrosive and poisonous character of greed, even when greed may be backed by legal right. Yet people keep drinking that poison. Why?

The simple fact is that, almost instinctively, we regard wealth as an inherently good thing. It is not. Nor is it an inherently bad thing. As long as we think of it as inherently good, however, we will drink the poison of greed, and make messes of our lives and of the world.

We human beings don't change much. A 175 year old sermon by the great John Henry Newman could be preached today with good effect. "All bow down before wealth. Wealth is that to which the multitude of men pay an instinctive homage. They measure happiness by wealth; and by wealth they measure respectability . . . It is a homage resulting from a profound faith . . . that with wealth he may do all things."

There it is. The Fool places his faith not in God, but in wealth. Therefore the Fool, at the end of his life, hears the terrifying words "I do not know you." The Saint truly places his Faith in God. Therefore, at the end of his life, the Saint hears the beautiful words, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Come, share your master's joy."

No. Wealth is not inherently bad. The point is simply that it is not inherently good either. It is only a tool, not a purpose for life. At times, one needs the tool (I think of that as I send off the church insurance payment for the year, \$18,000) The Lord and His apostles used that tool. The Lord, however, treated it only as a tool. In today's Gospel he warns the angry brother that hating his brother over that tool would be foolishness, and he warns all of us that making this tool the purpose and meaning of our lives is ultimate foolishness.

We are promised happiness through Faith and Love. There is no other road to happiness. Wealth, power, fame, health itself, or even significant accomplishments, do not produce happiness. Only Faith and Love produce happiness, and Faith and Love come from God and lead back to God.

Therefore, taught by the Lord Jesus' word and strengthened by His Presence, may we purify our minds to have Faith in God alone, and purify our hearts to Love God above all things, and our neighbors in Him.