

## **EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME**

*Gospel: Luke 12:13-21*

Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” But he said to him, “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” And he said to them, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”

Then he told them a parable: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ Then he said, I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

### **REFLECTION 1:**

### **HERE TODAY, GONE TOMORROW**

In Leo Tolstoy’s famous short story, ‘How much land does a man need’ a peasant makes a deal – for 1,000 roubles, the peasant can have all the land he can circle in one day. But if he does not make it back to the starting point by sunset, he will lose his money and receive no land. In a thrilling finish to the story, the peasant is racing against the setting sun. He was greedy and tried to cover too much area. He drops dead from exhaustion short of the finishing line. The peasant is buried in an ordinary grave, only six feet long, so answering the question posed in the title of the story. ‘How much land does a man need?’

An old inscription on a mosque in Agra (the former capital of Hindustan, in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh) reads: ‘Jesus on whom be peace, said: ‘The world is merely a bridge; you are to pass over it and not to build your dwelling on it.’ This saying only appears in the Gospel of Thomas, but its lesson is repeated throughout the other Gospels (Canonical), including today’s Gospel passage (Luke 12: 13-21).

Asked to arbitrate in a dispute between brothers over an inheritance, Jesus refused. Instead he responded with a pronouncement regarding greed and the acquisition of possessions, and with an illustration parable ‘Take care ... life does not consist in one’s possessions’, Jesus invited his listeners to shift their focus from passing things, however valuable these may be, and to devote themselves to becoming rich in what matters to God.

In his parable Jesus may be referring to the author of our first reading, for whom the material universe was as transitory as ‘vapour or a breath of air’ (Eccl 1:2). Jesus invited those who would follow him to focus on enduring things, or as Paul expressed it, ‘to seek and think of what is above’ (Col 3:1).

When Luke recounted this parable for his readers in the 80s, he was intent on sharpening their preparation for the coming kingdom of God – the believers were to live each day as if it were their last. None of us earns God’s gifts – the poor cannot buy them out of their poverty, nor can the rich with their riches. All is gift, but in order to be able to receive, our hands and our hearts cannot be full of other

things. We cannot make room for God if our own rooms are full and the hearse that one day will bear our body to the graveyard, will not pull a removal van behind us. We cannot follow God if we are not free to go. We are to take care to find our true and lasting home in God alone.

The Romans had a proverb which said that money was like sea water, the more you drink the thirstier you become and our desire will always be to get more – and that is the reverse of Jesus' way.

## **REFLECTION 2: WHAT WE TREASURE**

The story is told about a man who acquired a magic copy of his daily paper; it was dated one year in advance. So by browsing through this special copy, he was enabled to determine what stocks to purchase and what property to invest in. This copy also contained the winning lotto numbers for the next 12 months as well as a list of the horses that would win the premier stakes. He was immensely happy, now he could be really rich. Finally, he turned to the obituary page and there he discovered his own death notice.

Now, that is exactly how the rich man in today's gospel thought - more barns, more possessions, a long life, rest, eat, drink and enjoy yourself (Lc. 12: 13-21). It sounds reasonable enough and so it seemed to some Jews in Jesus' day - the Hebrew concept of riches as a sign of a blessing and poverty an indication of being cursed.

One can imagine the shock that charged through the audience when Jesus told them what God says; 'No, you have missed the point, a bumper harvest is not given to be hoarded, rather it is to be shared out with others'. There was no mention in the parable of any reward for the labourers who were responsible for the abundance. It was all me, me, me, my barns, my harvest, my land.

When the day of judgement comes, as surely as it will for everyone, material possessions will be of little use. God is not interested in what we accumulate, only in what we share with others. As Qoheleth in our first reading reminds us, 'All things are vanity' - literally 'breath' 'vapour'.

So, one may very well ask, what should we do? Should we rush out like a Francis of Assisi and dispose of everything we own? No, this isn't the answer. According to Jesus, riches in themselves are not bad. The rich man in the parable was not called a fool because he was rich, but rather, being rich, he had no regard for God or his fellow human beings. As William James put it, 'The greatest use of a life is to spend it on something that will outlast it'. The farmer in the parable had a fully stocked barn but his heart was empty.

Of course we all need the things that money can buy - money is food on the table, clothes on our backs and a roof over our heads. Money provides educational opportunities for our children and security in autumn years. But for all its benefits, there are simply some things we cannot buy - friendship, courage, wisdom. The real meaning in life lies not in what we own, but in what we can become. Prosperity should never rob us of the true riches in life. Let us own what we have but never allow it to possess us - take time to smell the roses along the way and recall what Jesus said, 'where your treasure is, there will your heart be also'.