

18th Sunday in Ordinary Time – C

“Vanity of vanities, all is vanity!” This is perhaps the most well-known line from the most depressing book of the Bible, the book of Ecclesiastes. It is unlike any other book in Scripture. It seems to be more philosophical than religious. Throughout the entire book, its author seems to be conducting a sort of thought experiment, trying to find meaning in the good things of this life. In his attempts to find meaning in life, this person named *Qoheleth*, a Hebrew word often translated as *the Preacher*, instead only seems to encounter meaninglessness, and grows increasingly despondent. In fact, if the Gospels are the Good News, then the book of Ecclesiastes seems to be the Bad News.

And this is the only time in the three-year cycle of Sunday Mass readings that we hear from Ecclesiastes. So why does the Church include this strange, depressing reading, which seems to

even contradict the hopeful message of the Gospels? Why does it even appear in Scripture at all? Why have people over the centuries turned to it as matter for spiritual reflection? Taken on its own, this reading doesn't offer hope. But the Church has intended for it to be read along with the other two readings we heard today in order to give it meaning. In other words, it has to read *in context* with the rest of Scripture, and especially with the Gospels.

So in our Gospel reading, a man interrupts Jesus in the midst of his preaching to ask him to adjudicate a family dispute. He wants Jesus to take his side and tell his brother to share his inheritance with him. Rather than try to solve the dispute, Jesus instead uses this opportunity to teach the crowd: "Take care to guard against all greed, for though one may be rich, one's life does not consist of possessions." And then he goes on to relate the parable of a rich man who has a little dilemma, what some might

nowadays call a “first world problem”: he is so wealthy and his harvest so abundant that he doesn’t know where to store everything.

Wealthy countries don’t have a problem of scarcity. We don’t really have a problem of hunger in this country for example. Few people actually go hungry here thanks not only to the abundance of our society but also things like food pantries and so on. The problem here is more often referred to now as “food insecurity” – some families do not always know where their next meal is coming from. But enough food is available that no one has to go hungry. Unlike some other countries around the world where there may not be enough food to go around, or there are no food pantries, or people do not have enough money to feed their families. That’s not really the problem here. Here the problem is often the opposite: the problem of abundance. We have so much food, and so much unhealthy food, that it has created a different set of health

problems. And think of all the stuff that we have – our houses, the average size of which make them the biggest in the world, are not even big enough to store all our stuff, and so we pay for expensive storage units, just to store the stuff that we've accumulated but rarely if ever use.

So, back to the parable of the rich man, wondering what to do with all his wealth. I know, he exclaims, I will tear down my old barns and build bigger ones! Then I can rest, eat, drink, and be merry, and enjoy and all the wealth I have accumulated! Little does he realize that that very night God will demand his life from him. All the wealth he has spent his life accumulating – what will happen to it? He won't be able to enjoy it himself. That very night it will all become completely useless to him. How rich was this rich man after all? What did he really own that he could take with him? Even his life was not his own– rather, it was on loan to him from God, and that night the loan would come due.

Vanity of vanity, all is vanity! This word *vanity* as used in Ecclesiastes does not mean what we commonly understand it to mean, i.e. excessive concern or attention to one's appearance. The word vanity here is translated from the Hebrew word *hebel* which means vapor, mist, or breath. Qoholeth says that all the things that we strive after, all the material things, all the money, all the accolades that we spend so much time and energy pursuing are no more than vapor, mist, breath. They exist for a moment and then are gone. Qoholeth goes to the brink of despair looking for meaning in these things and ultimately finding none. The rich man in the parable bases the whole of his life in pursuit of these things, only to die at the very peak of his worldly success.

So where is the hope in this seemingly gloomy message? It is to be found in the words of our second reading from St. Paul's letter to the Colossians. And these words of hope are found in the

form of an exhortation: in other words, do what I am about to tell you and you will find hope; do this and you will find meaning in life. Don't do it and in the end you will not find meaning. The things that you pursue so relentlessly in this life are no more than vapor; when you finally attain them, they vanish into thin air. Don't be like that rich man in the parable, Jesus warns us. Instead, store up for yourselves treasure in heaven. And as St. Paul says, "Seek what is above...not of what is on earth."

In other words, we should always keep in mind our final goal. What's our final goal? Winning the lottery? Retiring to a nice condo in Florida? Investing in the next big stock? No – our final goal is eternal life with God, where there is no lottery, no Florida, no stock market. Instead, there is eternal joy, being face to face with God, in his loving embrace. Thinking about this is not being morbid; it is being wise. And, as Jesus tells us, ignoring this is being foolish.

I remember once waking up one morning years ago when I was still trying to figure out what to do with my life, and at the very moment I woke up I had this sense – even stronger than that, more like an intuition – that there would come a day at some point in the future without me in it. The sun would rise, people would get up and get ready for work, the day would begin – in other words, the world would go on – but I would not be a part of that world. Why I suddenly had this intuition I do not know – it came out of nowhere. Now of course, it's not like this was news to me, but I understood it – I knew it – in a completely new way.

This life is short and we mustn't forget that. Every day is a gift from God and an opportunity to either accumulate vapor here on earth or to accumulate treasure in heaven. We can begin today. We should have our eternal goal in mind in every decision we make. When we think about what we are going to do each day,

we should ask ourselves whether it builds up treasure for ourselves here on earth or in heaven.

Now none of this is to say that we should just sit around waiting for death. Far from it! We do have our lives to live. We do have to earn our living. And there's nothing wrong with enjoying the good things of God's creation, provided that we always keep eternal life in mind. And in fact, there's also nothing inherently wrong with wealth. Jesus did say after all: "One may be rich," but he immediately added, "one's life does not consist of possessions." The problem with the rich man was not that he was rich per se, the problem was that he only thought of himself and only used his wealth for himself. He accumulated this wealth not to share with others, but rather to be hoarded so that he could "enjoy" it. Wealth is necessary in order to help those who have less. Every parish, every charity, needs money in order to stay open and serve people. The comparative wealth we enjoy is not a bad thing,

provided that we are generous with it, giving to charity, providing for the needs of the Church, providing for the needs of the poor.

Through generosity, kindness, works of service, of mercy, and of charity, we build up treasure in heaven. When we remember that life is a gift from God, and that we will return to God one day, we are being wise, not foolish. And then death does not have to be a source of fear but an occasion for hope. We can anticipate that eternal day when Christ will be all in all.

- **August 2, 2025 at St. Mary's, Spring Lake**