

First Impressions 18th SUNDAY -C-

Ecclesiastes 1: 2; 2:21-23 Psalm 95 Colossians 3: 1-5, 9-11 Luke 12: 13-21

By: Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Well, here we are in the middle of the summer season (at least those of us in the northern hemisphere) when picnics, barbecues and beaches come to the forefront of our consciousness. Happy thoughts like that help distract us from the grim thoughts that seem constantly on our minds these days: the world is in painful conflict; our nation is at war; bombing deaths claim innocent lives daily; wasteful and brutal wars in Africa----all this, plus the usual stuff of our personal lives, where the news isn't always bright either. We need a break and Qoheleth, in our Ecclesiastes reading, doesn't seem inclined to give us one with his drone, "Vanity of vanities....All things are vanity!" Thanks a lot, Qoheleth!

It is no wonder that the Book of Ecclesiastes doesn't have a great reputation among biblical readers. It is considered by many as negative, pessimistic, cynical and worldly. Hardly what one would expect from a book in the bible! But many do like Ecclesiastes because it looks at life squarely in the eyes—it is blunt and honest. Ecclesiastes (or as he is called in Hebrew, Qoheleth) isn't what you would expect in the bible. Where is the faith we are used to in biblical writers? Qoheleth probably got into the biblical literature because he deals with real life and doesn't paint over what is false or unholy.

Qoheleth seems to have been a respected teacher in the academic world of Jerusalem, and he wrote about the prizes life has to offer the successful. He wondered aloud whether it was all worth it. Today's reading is the opening of his book, and it begins with a big challenge: what and where we place our security may not be as secure as we think. "All things are vanity!" What we pursue and where we invest our energies may not be worth anything. Even the wise and knowledgeable, who have worked hard throughout life, will only have to leave their property, "to another who has not labored over it." What is important to keep in mind, as we read today's selection is that the old sage, or his editor, ends his book with a section that gives hope to those whose view of life he challenged (11:9-12:8). "The last word, when all is heard: Fear God and keep God's commandments, for this is a person's all. Because God will bring to judgment every work, with all its hidden qualities, whether good or bad" (12:13-14). The book ends with a comment about the sage by his editor. "Qoheleth sought to find pleasing sayings and to write down true sayings with precision" (12: 10).

Qoheleth looked out at the world around him and saw too much complacency and dishonesty.

He saw that political leaders would not address injustices. In addition, he also condemns those his society called “wise,” those who, like Qoheleth, were teachers and who had excessive trust in their own science and wisdom (8:17). Today we read Qoheleth’s attack on the conventional wisdom of his day: the good and truly wise weren’t always rewarded; while those who didn’t deserve it were rewarded for doing nothing worthy of their prize. Qoheleth describes the world in which he lived about three centuries before Christ; but he could just as easily be describing our 21st century as well.

So, perhaps today we need another mid-summer’s look at our Ecclesiastes’ selection. While we enjoy what refreshes, pleases and recreates us this season, we keep our eyes wide open, and we reflect on what kind of soil we have built our security. Is it the sand of passing delights, or is it the foundational rock of God’s Word? As we will see in today’s gospel, Jesus has more than a little dose of Qoheleth in him.

Today we hear another of Jesus’ parables. It is not just for this summer season, but is an “anytime parable,” good for any season of the year as well as any season in a person’s life. According to the usual measuring standards of the day, the parable begins very well indeed. Who wouldn’t want to be in the man’s position? He is already rich, and it sounds like he is getting even richer; his land has produced a “bountiful harvest.” Picture his house--- rather his estate---his ample table overflowing with delicacies. Look into his jam-packed wardrobes and closets. Feel his sense of security. The only problem he has is that his barns aren’t big enough for additional incoming wealth. Such a problem! It’s like telling a person they have won ten million dollars in the lottery. The problem for them would be how they are going to spend it.

Then comes the clinker. Just when everything seemed so perfect, a verdict is passed on his whole life by God: “You fool, this night your life shall be demanded of you and the things you have prepared, to whom will they belong?” In the midst of contentment and self-congratulation comes complete collapse. Everything falls apart. This isn’t just a story made up by Jesus a long time ago. We know situations in modern life that sound a lot like this parable. The billionaire chief executive of an international corporation gets arrested and is sentenced in Federal Court. But this isn’t a parable just for the very rich and comfortable, for who among us hasn’t had a sudden change happen in our lives that throws us completely off balance? ---The midnight phone call that breaks the news of the sudden death of a loved one; a job loss; a child who makes a foolish life altering choice; catastrophic illness; a divorce, etc. When the sudden and unexpected happen we are tested and challenged: where were our riches? On whom or what did we place our security? Life can take a fickle and cruel turn and toss our world upside down and leave us in turmoil and insecurity.

Jesus is being a realistic. He is a wise teacher reminding us how life can be and he wants us well grounded in what really counts. He says that real life “does not consist of possessions.” Our true treasure is to be rich “in what matters to God.” Here’s where the parable gets us thinking: “What matters to God?” It’s a question that can guide our choices today. We are not talking here about the everyday choices we make: whole wheat or rye bread? Fabric softener or none in the laundry? Watch tv or read a book? Jesus’ question concerns the more significant choices we make and the things we do.

“What matters to God?” We might consider that question by reflecting on the riches God has given us; like the people in our lives and the love they have for us and we for them. The question might help guide us make the sacrifices we want to make for another. We might decide to deal with a hurt we have had and find a way to seek healing. We might ask ourselves how much do I really need in my life and what can I give away to those who lack the basics? Well that’s just a start. Each of us much consider, “What matters to God?” and in prayer ask God’s Spirit to guide us in our response. That might be a good prayer to bring to this Eucharist today, a prayer for wisdom and a generous spirit with which to respond. “Open our eyes this day, O God, help us to appreciate the true riches you have given us and guide us in always choosing them over what is false, illusory and passing.”

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Kevin j. O’Neil, C.S.S.R and Peter Black, C.S.S.R, THE ESSENTIAL MORAL HANDBOOK: A GUIDE TO CATHOLIC LIVING. (Liguori: Liguori, Missouri, 2003) Paper, \$13.95. ISBN 0-7648-0922-9

A discussion of the fundamentals of Catholic moral theology with applications to daily life. Modern life is complex as technology and medical advances offer challenges to the choices we make. This book is an excellent guide for the general reader, as well as those in pastoral ministry.

QUOTABLE

Virtues...nurtured as skills for living a life of love in union with God, who is love, are dimensions of one’s moral character that make the perceptions of what is good easier. They are not merit badges which we wear to prove our goodness to others. Rather, they are the dispositions, demonstrated in actions, which shape us as the people whom God has created us to be. St. Thomas said, in fact, that virtues dispose one toward the good readily, easily, and delightfully. So, virtuous persons, through ongoing right feeling, thinking and choosing, form themselves as virtuous in cooperation with the grace of God.
O’Neil and Black–page 42.

JUSTICE NOTES
BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS

This week we celebrate the Feast of the Transfiguration of Jesus as well as the anniversary of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, an event of catastrophic “transfiguration”. Our Church, through the voices of Popes and Bishops has spoken out forcefully on the subject of Nuclear Weapons.

“In the face of the [human-made] calamity that every war is, one must affirm and reaffirm, again and again, that the waging of war is not inevitable or unchangeable. Humanity is not destined to self-destruction. Clashes of ideologies, aspirations and needs can and must be settled and resolved by means other than war and violence.”

Pope John Paul II, Appeal for Peace, Hiroshima, Japan.

“Nuclear deterrence as a national policy must be condemned as morally abhorrent because it is the excuse and justification for the continued possession and further development of these horrendous weapons. ”

-- US Catholic Bishops, The Morality of Nuclear Deterrence

“The time has come to rid planet Earth of nuclear weapons-all of them, everywhere... Nuclear weapons, whether used or threatened, are grossly evil and morally wrong.

Cardinal Danneels, Statement to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Preparatory Committee

“...the arms race is an utterly treacherous trap for humanity, and one which injures the poor to an intolerable degree.” ***Gaudium et Spes, Second Vatican Council***

“This Conference resolves to call upon our respective governments to urge all nations to agree by treaty to stop the production, testing, stock-piling and usage of nuclear weapons and to press for an international mandate for all member states to prohibit nuclear warfare.” ***Archbishop Martino, Apostolic Nuncio, UN***

“(Today) excessive nuclear arsenals, their continued spread, and proposals to further develop and use them underscore the need for much deeper cuts in nuclear weapons and ultimately a global nuclear ban.” ***US Catholic Bishops 2003***

What can I do:

1. Pray fervently for peace, and that the renewed attempts of our government to invest in nuclear weapons cease.

- Learn more about our government’s nuclear weapons policies and plans to develop new ones. Speak out in the words of our Popes and Bishops. Be a voice of peace.
- Contact your Senators and Representatives. Ask them to vote against funding for nuclear weapons testing and production.

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, NC)

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

"It is time to abandon the death penalty -- not just because of what it does to those who are executed, but because of how it diminishes all of us... We ask all Catholics--pastors, catechists, educators and parishioners -- to join us in rethinking this difficult issue and committing ourselves to pursuing justice without vengeance. With our Holy Father, we seek to build a society so committed to human life that it will not sanction the killing of any human person."

-----("Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice," U.S. Catholic Bishops, Nov. 2000,)

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or, whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty." Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

- Rodney Taylor #0472274 (On death row since 10/23/98)
- James King #0226428 (11/23/98)
- Jeffery Meyer #0280127 (2/4/99)
-

---Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606