

“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:

Not a very bright tone to today's first reading, is there?----“Vanity of vanities, says Qoheleth, vanity of vanities! All things are vanities!” In fact, these lines sum up all of Ecclesiastes. This book belongs to the wisdom tradition and is one of the latest books in the Hebrew scriptures. As you read through it you realize it is addressed to people of means. While our congregation might not be wealthy, nevertheless, in comparison to the vast poverty of the world, most of us certainly are “well off.” So, we can't brush the text aside as if it were addressed just to the upper crust of society

Ecclesiastes is a wise person's reflections on life. In today's passage the sage reminds us that nothing can survive death: no success, reputation, gain or profit will last beyond a person's lifetime. Qoheleth's views life with gloomy eyes and attentive ears and decides everything is in vain. It's hard to imagine how this pessimistic book ever made it into the Hebrew canon of scripture. The author is uncertain, but because this book is attributed to Solomon, it got included in the bible. What can we say about this somber and pessimistic reading today?

Well, it does point us to the gospel. Ecclesiastes sobers us up in case we have been intoxicated and distracted by a reliance on what we have achieved on our own. If we base our merit and sense of self-worth on what the world values and grasps, then Qoheleth says to us today, “Wake up you dreamers, what you treasure is ephemeral and lacking in permanence.” We can gain from Qoheleth's wisdom if his words prompt us at this liturgy to look over our lives and examine where we are investing our energies and what dominates our attention.

At a recent retreat I attended, a preacher said, “If you want to know where your heart is, look over the stubs in your checkbook—where you money goes, that's where your heart is.” I guess you could say the same thing about our calendars. Look over the last few months---how have we been spending our time? With whom? Doing what? Where? As we do this review of priorities, would Qoheleth's words today cause us to squirm? “Vanity of vanities...all things are vanity.” I don't think I would want to have Qoheleth over with friends for a dinner party. He's a real “downer.” But here in church today, he is a wake-up call directing our attention away from the ephemeral towards what will last and be enriching for us and our families, as well as making some contribution towards a better world.

There is another thing Qoheleth contributes to our reflection today. Though he is one of the sages, he is very different from other traditional wisdom writers. They taught that life made sense, good deeds were rewarded, and hard work resulted in prosperity and happiness. For example, look at the Book of Proverbs: “The reward of humility and fear of the Lord is riches, honor and life” (22:4). “The trustworthy person will be richly blessed; the one who is in haste to grow rich will not go unpunished” (28:20). Really? But the good don’t always gain in this life and experience shows that the humble don’t get honored. We also know the greedy and “the one who is in haste to grow rich” step over others in their treasure quest, do get rich and don’t seem to get punished.

We need sages like Job and Qoheleth to remind us that in this life we don’t always see the good rewarded, justice prevail, or hard workers paid fairly for their labors. For most of the world’s poor, life isn’t fair—far from it---it is imperfect, limited and oppressive. Qoheleth shakes the comfortable out of our dreamy, rose-colored illusions. Granted all in our congregations may not be experiencing frailty in their lives, but at least some are. So, the preacher might speak for them today, voice their frustrations and fears and speak a word of hope to them from God today.

Only Luke has the parable of the rich fool. Here we have a person who doesn’t seem to have heard Qoheleth’s wisdom about the transitory nature of the things on which we often place trust--- “All things are vanity!” Luke is beginning a section in his gospel about possessions, covetousness and anxiety: 12:13-21;22-34. The petitioner from the crowd initiates these teachings. The rich man in the parable has pinned his hopes on what he owns; but ignored who he is. This man already has enough for himself; but his appetite is for more.

And we? Do we know when enough is enough? A friend repeats this mantra as a daily reminder so as to avoid greed and practice a simpler life, “I have all that I want, I have all that I need.” It’s a statement that can stir thanksgiving in our hearts as we offer today’s Eucharist. Granted, we pray for important needs in the world, and for our friends, family and church. But a simpler life view might help keep our vision and prayer focused on what’s really important. As we hear this parable about hoarding we can reflect on what we have back home and so be moved to rid our attics, basements and garages of things we don’t need--- but others might. There are many poor in our parish and community who don’t have the essentials, but for those of us who have more, we are urged by the parable to get our priorities in order and do a realistic evaluation of our lives. “I have all that I want, I have all that I need.” A similar statement could be said about our nation, “We have more than we want, far more than we need.” But others don’t, so let’s open our “barns” for them.

The farmer in the story isn't a bad person. He is rich, but that's not a sin—except in Luke's gospel riches are looked upon with suspicion. And sure enough, as the story unfolds we discover the man's true spirit—he is greedy and isolated from others. Luke may be suggesting that such are the effects of riches on a person's life. We Americans admire rugged individualism; we extol “the self-made person.” We congratulate the ingenuity of such people; they “pulled themselves up by their own boot straps.” Well, that's not how people in Jesus' world thought. Individuals were always members of a community, not viewed apart from their surroundings. Indeed, a person's very identity was based on being a member of a certain family, a particular tribe, a specific town, etc. Apart from the community, a person had no identity. So, Jesus' hearers would have been shocked by this farmer's “rugged individualism”—he has isolated himself from the very community that gave him his identity, his sense of self. He never consults with anyone, neither God nor someone within his family or community, to discuss what to do with his excess. Instead, he has set about tearing down his barns to build bigger ones. As far as he can tell, this farmer has had a really good year, but his gaze is turned on only himself, his conversation is only to himself. “Boy, I've done real well for myself. I think I'll expand the house....get a bigger car...stash extra money away...move to an upper-class neighborhood...get a boat...etc.” He's not a bad guy, but God calls him a fool. The man should have read Ecclesiastes and kept things in perspective.

Luke is making his usual point in this parable. Christians have to share what we have and live in trust that God will provide us with what is really important—deep and meaningful life, “daily bread” and more. According to the ending of last week's gospel, we will get the best gift of all from our “Abba”—the Holy Spirit—unearned, totally free

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

Raymond E. Brown, *AN INTRODUCTION TO THE NEW TESTAMENT*. (New York: Doubleday, 1997)

This book is written for the student of the New Testament who is not a scholar and does not know Greek. Brown assumes a middle of the road approach to interpretation and still informs the reader of contemporary biblical opinion. Has excellent information about the contemporary world of the New Testament, and its theological issues as well as rich illustrative material—maps, tables and appendixes. Brown is a top notch scholar, teacher and preacher and this is an excellent resource for the preacher trying to interpret the meaning of the text for our modern world.

QUOTABLE

(Here is what Raymond Brown says about today's Gospel text.)

The pericope on greed and the parable of the rich barn-builder (12: 13-21) is distinctively Lucan. The hopes to divide an inheritance equally or to enlarge a growing business, understandable in themselves, run against the contention that strong interest in material possessions is not reconcilable with interest in God. Ideally Christians are asked to live by the maxim "One's life does not depend on what one possesses" (12:15...). The fate of the barn-builder reflects the expectation of an individual judgment taking place before the general judgment at the end of the world. A passage decrying cares about earthly things (12:22-34) illustrates how well off one can be without such cares. The instruction, "Sell your possessions and give alms" (12:33) is very Lucan in its outlook.

—page 247 in AN INTRODUCTION TO THE NEW TESTAMENT, by Raymond E. Brown.

JUSTICE NOTES

Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence, and the Common Good
A Statement of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

Responsible scientific research is always careful to recognize uncertainty and is modest in its claims. Yet over the past few decades, the evidence of global climate change and the emerging scientific consensus about the human impact on this process have led many governments to reach the conclusion that they need to invest time, money, and political will to address the problem through collective international action.

The virtue of prudence is paramount in addressing climate change. This virtue is not only a necessary one for individuals in leading morally good lives but is also vital to the moral health of the larger community. Prudence is intelligence applied to our actions. It allows us to discern what constitutes the common good in a given situation. Prudence requires a deliberate and reflective process that aids in the shaping of the community's conscience. Prudence not only helps us identify the principles at stake in a given issue but also moves us to adopt courses of action to protect the common good. Prudence is not, as popularly thought, simply a cautious and safe approach to decisions. Rather, it is a thoughtful, deliberate, and reasoned basis for taking or avoiding action to achieve a moral good.

In facing climate change, what we already know requires a response; it cannot be easily dismissed. Significant levels of scientific consensus—even in a situation with less than full

certainly, where the consequences of not acting are serious—justifies, indeed can obligate, our taking action intended to avert potential dangers. In other words, if enough evidence indicates that the present course of action could jeopardize humankind's well-being, prudence dictates taking mitigating or preventative action.

This responsibility weighs more heavily upon those with the power to act because the threats are often greatest for those who lack similar power, namely, vulnerable poor populations, as well as future generations.....Significant delays in addressing climate change may compound the problem and make future remedies more difficult, painful, and costly. On the other hand, the impact of prudent actions today can potentially improve the situation over time, avoiding more sweeping action in the future.

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

“Can you imagine what it’s like to have your boy on death row? Can you imagine what it’s like to visit him there every Saturday and tell him, ‘I love you. I’ll see you next week,’ when you never know if they’re going to call and say, ‘He’s up next—it’s time for his execution.’”

----Jeanetter Johnson, Mother of Alan Gell, who was retried and found innocent because prosecutors withheld evidence that might have cleared him of first-degree murder.

[The News and Observer, February 15, 2004, Raleigh, NC]

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:.....

- Malcom Geddie #0143501 (On death row since 9/29/94)
- Glenn E. Chapman #0072845 (11/16/94)
- Daniel Cummings #0095279 (12/16/94)

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