

“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:

In today's gospel, it would seem that Jesus has an opportunity to make peace between two brothers feuding over their inheritance. Since such family disagreements could easily break into violence and blood feud, it is strange that Jesus did not accept the invitation to settle the matter and keep the family peace. The fact that Jesus is being asked to intervene in a family matter shows how highly these people regarded him. Yet he demurs and turns aside the compliment implied in the request. Since he follows the request with the advice to, "guard against all greed," one suspects he senses that greed was a motive in the fraternal strife. Maybe too, he didn't want to be seen as another of many notables who could settle such disputes. He is about something very important; he brings a unique message that has to be declared clearly and with focus. Money debates in a family are not to detract him from his mission of proclaiming God's reign to those rich enough to have an inheritance, but more especially, to those who are on no one's receiver-list because they are too poor and too anonymous in the world's eyes.

John Pilch [THE CULTURAL WORLD OF JESUS, SUNDAY BY SUNDAY, CYCLE C] alludes to an ancient Mediterranean perspective that may be at play in this story. Jesus' peasant listeners believed that everything, health, wealth, honor--everything--- existed in limited and sufficient supply for each person. If one gained more of these commodities, others would be the losers. Thus, to want more, was greedy. The landowner, in the parable Jesus tells, has plans, but they only include himself. He will tear down his barns and build bigger ones, thus guaranteeing his future. Or so it seems to him. He says to himself, "You have so many good things stored up for many years, rest, eat, drink, be merry." Pilch suggests he may have other plans as well. Considering the vagaries of weather, bountiful harvests could easily be followed by lean ones. Peasants who lived on the edge of disaster, whose limited resources were barely enough to get them from one harvest to the next, would become desperate in lean times. It was very common during famine for the poor to have to borrow from the few privileged landowners. As a result, they would go into debt and risk the loss of what little

they had, due to the high interest rates charged by people like the man in today's harvest, who had more than enough for themselves.

Recently I sat in a parish scripture reflection group. This parable was the focus of our attention. We wondered what else the rich fool could have done. "He should have given the money to help the poor," was the consensus. St. Luke's gospel often shows skepticism and distrust of riches. As Pilch points out, in Luke 16: 1-9, Jesus praises the shrewd manager for using resources to gain friends. The rich man in today's parable could have helped those in need and also made friends among them, bridging the gap that usually exists between the "haves" and the "have-nots." He would have been the richer for it. He would have had a new community of friends, no matter what hardships or surprises the future presented to him and his family.

The rich man thinks he is secure, that he has provided for himself wisely. From even modern standards he is making a wise investment. However, no one has to tell us how quickly our lives can go in reverse. As I write this, another major dot com company has announced decreased earnings and plans to lay off several thousand employees. Such announcements hardly seem possible in the light of the huge profits these companies, their stockholders and their employees were pulling in just a couple years ago, when new college graduates were sure they would earn their first million by their 25th birthday.

The parable touches each of us and it isn't just about material goods. Death, sickness and life's downturns have a way of intruding on our serenity, upsetting our plans and challenging the very choices we once felt so secure in making. Sudden changes to our routine come announced by a late-night phone call or a doctor's report during, what was supposed to be, a "routine checkup." However, not all life altering changes spring upon us suddenly. There are also the changes that have been building all along that we have ignored: we have grown old; our spouse wants a divorce; a child turns away from us and makes a dreadful choice. We realize our world is not what we thought it was or that our best-made plans have gone awry. We come to a moment when we wake up and hear the echo of God's voice from the parable, "You fool." But maybe it isn't God's voice, but our own. "How foolish I have been!" "Why didn't I realize what I was doing?" "Why did I put others and God on the back burner and get so distracted by my own pursuits?"

The problem with the rich man is that he was not letting others—his family, friends, the poor or even God, in on his deliberations. He talks to himself. Notice all the times “I” appears in his monologue, “I shall...I shall...I shall....” Where were his wife and children when he was sketching out his future? Weren’t their lives affected by his choices? Why were his eyes so blinded and closed to the present moment and the innumerable desperately poor around him?

The parable is a wakeup call to us. It throws light on some part of our lives, for who among us can say we are not greedy in some way? We tend to measure our lives and our security on what we can do for ourselves or on what we own. We also see our present and future in selfish terms where we are the main or only players. We too disconnect from those who should be integral to how we plan, what we decide. The parable calls us to examine our lives. And in that it is a grace. It reminds us that, as omnipotent or secure as possessions can make us feel, we are not independent but connected to others and to God. We need to look into our lives and invest in true riches—those that make us “rich in what matters to God.”

The word Luke uses for greed is the same as the one in today’s Colossians reading where Paul calls greed “idolatry.” We commit idolatry when we put our lives and our trust into someone or something other than God. We can easily slip into idolatry when our life is a monologue, when we are talking and listening only to our own advice. Being at this Eucharist today should interrupt any monologue we might be having in our lives right now. Notice the people around us today. Who are the ones with whom we worship? Are we connected enough to at least some of them to know their joys and hurts, their true wealth and their poverty? When I hear the Word of God proclaimed and receive the food from this table, I am putting aside my monologue. It’s the monologue in which I am the subject and object of my life. Here at least I am trying to be open to the life altering grace of God that lets others become part of my plans and hopes. The very same grace that opens my heart to the God who is always wanting what is truly good for me.

We hear the sobering word of Ecclesiastes today. It calls us to evaluate our lives. We are not disconnected but live in solidarity with people and the natural world around us. Our decisions affect them for better or worse. If we are only concerned with satisfying our own needs, then they suffer and in the long run, so do we. The Lucan parable has the power to open our minds and our hearts to a broader view of

ourselves and the world — if we would let it.

A further word on the second reading. This is the fourth Sunday that our second reading has come from Colossians. In the previous readings we were told that Christ's place is primary in the spiritual and physical universe. Today's passage, like the one from Ecclesiastes, calls for us to focus on "what pertains to higher realms." This does not mean we are called to be other worldly, but to be attentive to what pertains to God-- our faith in Christ, and the reality of God in our world. Baptism has "raised us up in company with Christ," and just as he lives a new resurrected life, our lives must show the signs of the new life that is in us. It is not just that we worship together that shows we are Christians; but all we do in our daily lives must reflect a "resurrected life."

This reading occurs towards the end of Colossians, and the second part of the epistles tend to sound moralistic--listing lots of "dos and don'ts." If you preach from this reading be sure to remind your hearers of the truths that were stated earlier in the epistle--that baptism and the new life it gives through Christ, enables us to respond in the manner spelled out in today's selection.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER:

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE NEW TESTAMENT by Raymond E. Brown.
(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 was 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:

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.

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

JUSTICE NOTES

Therefore, everyone has the right to possess a sufficient amount of the earth's goods for themselves and their family. This has been the opinion of the Fathers and Doctors of the church, who taught that people are bound to come to the aid of the poor and to do so not merely out of their superfluous goods. Persons in extreme necessity are entitled to take what they need from the riches of others.

Faced with a world today where so many people are suffering from want, the council asks individuals and governments to remember the saying of the Fathers: "Feed the people dying of hunger, because if you do not feed them you are killing them," and it urges them according to their ability to share and dispose of their goods to help others, above all by giving them aid which will enable them to help and develop themselves.

----- from **GAUDIUM ET SPES – PASTORAL CONSTITUTION ON THE CHURCH IN THE MODERN WORLD**, #69
(Second Vatican Council, 1965)