

18th Sunday in Ordinary time C/2007

I would like to start this homily by telling you a story. I come from a country named Democratic Republic of Congo, formerly known as Zaire, one of the richest African countries, with a lot of potentialities, but whose population is poor. For thirty two years we had a dictatorship as a form of government. While the population lived in poverty and the economy was grumbling, Mobutu had for himself billions of dollars in a bank account. Thanks to his relationships with European governments and Washington, his power was strong and stronger. Everything succeeded him: power, honor, money, women, etc.

But as every coin has its reverse side, suddenly Mobutu got an incurable cancer. As though all that was not enough, the rebels attacked the country. Surprised and overtaken by the events, Mobutu fled the country and went to die in exile in Morocco without honor or power.

Why do I tell you this story? Because I find its outcome similar to what is described in today's readings. In fact, today's readings raise these questions: Who is a human being? Why does he live? For what use are his knowledge and skills, power and success, when death can wipe all that away? What can a human being do in order to live in peace with himself? Where can he find that true peace and true treasure?

These questions are as old as the world, and yet they are still new and burning. When the author of the book of Ecclesiastes observes human life, his answer is simple and without ambiguity: "All things are vanity". They are vanity, because after all, nothing of all that a man gives himself with so much pain, toils and anxieties on earth is eternal. He can take nothing with him in the grave.

It is the same message we find in the Gospel. In spite of his riches and planning for the future, the rich man of the Gospel could not prevent death to strike him and to leave everything behind him. Is such a claim a plea against human success or project for the future or any effort to become rich in this world?

Not at all; that would be a misunderstanding of the message of Jesus. What Jesus wants with this parable is just to warn us that riches and success have a danger of closing up our heart to the plea of our fellow humans and to the appeal of God. Jesus wants to show us that the rich man has misled himself because if, humanly speaking, he is responsible for his success; he is not, however, responsible for the outcome of his life. His life depends primarily upon God who can dispose of it as he likes. It would be an illusion to think that we are totally and completely in control of our lives as we are with our material possessions.

Furthermore, Jesus invites us to open our eyes and recognize the truth that living only for possessions is the root of evil and suffering. Most of crimes committed in the world are not necessary the result of passion, but of cupidity and greed. Most of our headaches and heartaches, our long nights without sleep and full of worries and anxieties are usually over things. And yet, our value as human beings cannot be associated with our material possession. Material possession and human success are so fragile to be the main reason why we live.

What Jesus affirms in this Gospel is something we experience on a daily basis. In the front of money and goods even the best people lose their head and become deaf and blind. What counts is only personal interest and profits, even at the expense of familial ties. In fact, we know how many families have been devastated with dissension, never-ending process and splits because of money and dispute over inheritance. When Jesus rebukes the two brothers who want him to resolve their dispute over heritage, he is inviting us to realize that life makes sense only when we can relate to lasting values. When people seek only perishing values, one day they will be confronted with the truth that they are never satisfied.

Another point is that a life without reference to God is pure absurdity. In itself, life is a gift received from God; so are the things we own in the world. As such, we are not our own masters, but rather the stewards of God's many gifts. What is expected from a steward is a good governance of things entrusted to him and the recognition of the importance of his master. To ignore God, as though our possessions suffice for us, is to declare ourselves our own boss. And that is foolish. Moreover, it is impossible to build heaven on earth with our material possessions, whatever might be the satisfaction they give us. God alone is the true wealth of human beings. Of course, each of us can have a non-ending life, not because of our possessions, but if we build it with God. Such a life comes only from God.

All this helps understand what Saint Paul says in the second reading: "Seek what is above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God". With these words, St Paul is not pleading for an other-worldliness in which Christians withdraw from all the work and activities of this world. On the contrary, he lays down ethical principles which Christians should use by working and maintaining all good relationships in the world.

Christians should view everything against the background of eternity and no longer live as if this world was all that mattered. For that, they should set truth above lying, morality above immorality, purity above impurity, good above evil desires, and satisfaction with what they have above greed. That is how they become a new creation in Jesus Christ where all are equal and one people in spite of their different backgrounds.

Let us ask the Lord in this celebration to free us from the illusion of thinking that success and money are the reason why we have to live. May he free us from the anxiety that nothing is valuable outside of what we earn with our efforts. Life is more than that for which we struggle every day, more than riches we cannot take with us to the grave. There is a richness that is imperishable that comes from God. God is rich; whoever accumulates with God is really rich. God bless you all



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