

Homily for the 18th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C

July 31, 2022

St. Bavo Parish

Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.

First Reading: Ecclesiastes 1:2; 2:21-23 (All things are vanity!)

Responsory: Psalm 90 (If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.)

Second Reading: Colossians 3:1-5, 9-11 (Seek what is above, not what is of earth.)

Gospel: Luke 12:13-21 (Store up treasures which matter to God.)

The rich man in the parable has a happy “problem,” an overabundance of grain, which cannot fit into his barns. An abundant harvest really shouldn’t be a problem at all. It could be a wonderful opportunity to serve the community and help people in need. But, the rich man, in his greed, thinks only of himself. His solution is to *hoard* his goods, not to *share* them. He decides to tear down his barns and build larger ones, so that he’ll have plenty of resources stored up for years to come. Then, he can relax, eat and drink, and live luxuriously, while other people suffer and go hungry. In response to this brilliant plan, God says, “*You fool, this night your life will be demanded of you; and the things you have prepared, to whom will they belong?*”

Qoheleth pondered that same question. He poured much time and effort into investigating the ways of the world, trying to understand the meaning of life. But, in the end, he came up empty. His conclusion: “All things are vanity!” That is, “All things are meaningless.” There were several factors that led him to that rather depressing conclusion, but the main one was the simple fact that, “You can’t take it with you,” as the old saying goes. It is an undeniable truth that all the material possessions that a person acquires during the course of a lifetime, all the goods that one produces through wisdom, knowledge, skill and hard work, must pass to someone else who has *not* earned them. To Qoheleth, this is an absurdity. Even more absurd, he observed that no profit comes to the man who works so hard to achieve material success. He still lies awake at night, troubled, filled with sorrow and grief, because his possessions cannot give him the peace that he so ardently seeks.

Qoheleth has stumbled upon the very essence of greed. Greed is not just the desire for more wealth, more possessions, more luxuries... in general, more *stuff*. If that were the case, then one’s greed could be *satisfied* by the accumulation of enough possessions. But, greedy people *never* reach that point of satisfaction, where they are truly at peace, feeling that they have enough. That’s because greed is, at its heart, a belief that *no amount* of material goods is ever enough. Thus, the only solution for the greedy person is to keep working to acquire more and more and more, until time runs out and, “his life is demanded of him.”

That expression, which Jesus uses in the parable to describe the rich man’s death, was commonly used to describe calling in a debt or demanding repayment of a loan. The clever choice of words points out a common fallacy in the rich man’s way of thinking about his own life, a fallacy that leads many to greed. He thinks that his life and all the good things that he enjoys in this life *belong to him*. He can use them however he pleases. He can store up goods for himself, ignore the needs of everyone around him, and devote himself to enjoying a life of

luxury. But, God sees the man's life very differently. It is *on loan* to him. He's given a certain number of years, known only to God, and he's granted an abundance of blessings, which he can either put to good use or selfishly hoard away for his own personal security. If he uses those resources wisely, to benefit other people and to build up the Kingdom of God, then he will not leave this world empty-handed, lamenting that all his labors have come to nothing and that all his possessions must be left behind to others. If he becomes "rich in what matters to God," those riches will accompany him into the next life.

Jesus wants us to think about our earthly life as a preparation for the much greater life that is still to come. All the good things that we enjoy here are given to us in order to fulfill *God's purposes*, not just to satisfy our own earthly desires. If we devote all our efforts to building up more wealth for ourselves, then, in the end, we will find ourselves destitute in the things that matter to God. But, on the other hand, if we use the things of this world to make the world a better place, for ourselves and for others, then we will reach the end of our journey with an *abundance* of riches stored up for us *in heaven*.

Let's be clear, though, about what exactly these "heavenly treasures" are. Jesus is *not* exhorting us to earn our way into heaven by accumulating good deeds. That idea is called Pelagianism, a heresy that was condemned by the Church a very long time ago, though it's never really gone away. No, we Christians should all understand that eternal salvation is a gift from God, *not* a reward for a good life. In fact, the causality goes the opposite direction – a good and holy life should be a *response* to God's love, including his promise of eternal salvation.

So, what are these "heavenly treasures" that we're supposed to store up? Well, there are two types. First, there are all the good deeds that we do for others, which make their lives better. The treasures are not the deeds themselves, but the positive and lasting impact that they make in other people's lives. And, those are often difficult to quantify. How can you assess the impact that a kind word or a simple act of compassion may have on a person's life? Yet, we know that these treasures matter to God, because the Lord has told us that he identifies with the sorrowful and the suffering. Their pain is his pain; their joy is his joy.

Another type of treasure, also hard to quantify, is the virtues that we acquire over a lifetime. They form our character, molding us into an image of Christ, which each of us is called to be. Those virtues become a permanent part of us, remaining with us for all eternity. There is no greater comfort at the hour of our death than to know that we have lived well, in accordance with God's will, and that God is pleased with the person that we have become.

Still, even these heavenly treasures which *we* build up pale in comparison to the one that only God can give – eternal life. Unlike our earthly life, it will not be a loan to be called in at some future date. Rather, our eternal salvation will be a gift which truly *belongs* to us, not just for a time, but forever. So, let us prepare for that life now, while we still can.