

18th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle C

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

1st Reading - Ecclesiastes 1:2, 2:21-23

Ecclesiastes is fourth in the order of the wisdom books of the Old Testament [the others being Job, Psalms, Proverbs, and after Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs (Song of Solomon/Canticle of Canticles) and Sirach complete the wisdom books]. Ecclesiastes is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew title. It appears in many older Bibles under this Hebrew name, Qoheleth, which means “preacher” and comes from the start of the book “The words of the preacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem.” Qoheleth is not a proper name, it describes the position of one who speaks in an assembly. Hence Ecclesiastes is usually understood to be a qualified teacher, the leader of an assembly of wise men. The reference to his being the son of David is typical of pseudoepigraphical literature’s tendency to attribute the work of an unknown author to some illustrious person in order to give it greater credence. In this instance, the sacred writer chose to put the fruit of his reflections under the patronage of the most outstanding of Israel’s wise men. Ecclesiastes is one of the five scrolls which were read on the feast of Tabernacles, the others being Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, and Esther. The book’s twelve chapters all deal with the same theme – the uselessness of human things, which it describes as “vanity of vanities”. Put another way, it discusses the problem “What value has this earthly life for man?” Regarded from the viewpoint of the pessimist, this earthly life has no value. All is vanity. All human endeavor is a “pursuing of the wind.” There is an eternal sameness in things.

But we must remember that there is another aspect to life. Not everyone looks upon it with the eyes of a pessimist. Man can be relatively happy. Therefore let him enjoy life and the good things which it offers: but let him be mindful of his end; let him fear God and keep His commandments.

1:2 Vanity of vanities,

Vanity is a favorite word which is used 35 times in this book. It literally means “breath” or “vapor” and is used in the Psalms (39:6-7; 94:11, etc.) to indicate something that is transient, worthless, and empty.

says Qoheleth,

The name “Qoheleth” designates someone who has some relationship to a congregation, perhaps indicating a particular office such as teacher.

vanity of vanities! All things are vanity! ^{2:21} For here is a man who has labored with

wisdom and knowledge and skill, and to another, who has not labored over it, he must leave his property. This also is vanity and a great misfortune. ²² For what profit comes to a man from all the toil and anxiety of heart with which he has labored under the sun? ²³ All his days sorrow and grief are his occupation; even at night his mind is not at rest. This also is vanity.

Qoheleth at first enjoyed the fruits of his labor (2:10), but now he finds reason to detest them because they must be left to an heir who may play the fool with them (2:18-19) and who certainly will not have labored for them with all the sorrows and trials which accompany toil. Since work is arduous, and long-range planning for one's possessions is impossible, Qoheleth concludes that what is good is to find present enjoyment in the modest fruits of modest toil. Unfortunately the ability to enjoy is a gift of God which some do not receive, and that is another vanity in life.

2nd Reading - Colossians 3:1-5, 9-11

In last week's epistle reading we heard Saint Paul instruct us about baptism (the circumcision of Christ) being the rite of initiation into God's family in the New Covenant, the rite in the Old Covenant having been circumcision of the flesh. Today we hear the beginning of his instruction to us on living the Christian life. The part we hear today appears to be an early baptismal instruction.

3:1 If then you were raised with Christ, seek what is above,

The contrast between the "things above" and the "things of earth" is to be understood especially in view of the matters of Jewish law which Saint Paul has discussed in the preceding verses (dietary practices, new moon festival observances, etc.). These are material religious practices which are in opposition to Christ's victorious presence.

where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.

The expression from Psalm 110:1 implies His position of lordship and complete victory.

² Think of what is above, not of what is on earth.

"Let us think upon the things that are above, on the heavenly things, and meditate on them, where Christ has been lifted up and exalted. But let us forsake the world which is not ours, that we may arrive at the place to which we have been invited. Let us raise up our eyes on high, that we may see the splendor which shall be revealed." [Aphraates the Persian Sage (A.D. 336-345), *Treatises* 6,1]

³ For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

A definitive change (separation from material practices) since baptism which is continuous since that time. There may be a play on the contrast between a body being “hidden in the earth” at death and being “hidden in Christ” through a death to sin and separation from material things.

4 When Christ your life appears, then you too will appear with him in glory.

A definite reference to the future resurrection, although the main emphasis has been on the present resurrection with Christ

“But what did he go on to say? ‘When Christ appears, your life, then you also will appear with Him in glory.’ So now is the time for groaning, then it will be for rejoicing; now for desiring, then for embracing. What we desire now is not present; but let us not falter in desire; let long, continuous desire be our daily exercise, because the one who made the promise doesn’t cheat us.” [Saint Ambrose of Milan (ca. A.D. 385), *Sermons* 350A,4]

5 Put to death, then, the parts of you that are earthly:

In baptism you died to earthly things and became reborn in Christ; an absolute separation from the former type of life. Paul requires a radical self-denial which puts aside a self-centered life and instead focuses on the unity of the community.

immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and the greed that is idolatry.

The intervening verses (which we do not hear today) form a catalog of vices. The first five vices (contained in our reading today as part of verse 5) are mostly sins against purity. In verse 8 is another group of five which concern anger and sins of the tongue.

9 Stop lying to one another, since you have taken off the old self with its practices¹⁰ and have put on the new self, which is being renewed, for knowledge, in the image of its creator.

This is a corporate figure (see 1 Corinthians 15:45-47). The Christian embraces a new corporate community life in Christ.

“Seek nothing with exterior gold and bodily adornment; but consider the garment as one worthy to adorn him who is according to the image of his Creator, as the apostle says: ‘Stripping off the old man, and putting on the new, one that is being renewed unto perfect knowledge according to the image of his Creator.’ And he who has put on ‘the heart of mercy, kindness, humility, patience and meekness’ is clothed within and has adorned the inner man.” [Saint Basil the Great (ca. A.D. 370), *Homilies* 17,11]

11 Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision,

In Christ, head of a new humanity, the great social barriers of race, culture, and state of life

are broken down.

barbarian,

The term is *barbaros* which is translated here as “barbarian,” refers to a person who did not know Greek.

Scythian,

The equivalent of saying “a savage from the north”

slave, free; but Christ is all and in all.

Christ breaks down such distinctions and He is really all that matters because He is completely victorious and Lord of all (verse 1).

Gospel - Luke 12:13-21

Since our encounter with Jesus last week where He gave us the “our Father,” a prayer which is distinctive to Christians, He has driven a demon out of a mute man and has been accused of using the power of Beelzebul, has taught several parables and pronounced six woes on the Pharisees. During this time, a crowd of many thousands has gathered and Jesus is now teaching them. What we hear today is the parable of the rich fool, a parable which is found only in the Gospel of Luke.

13 Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to share the inheritance with me.”

The Mishnah (the first section of the Talmud, comprising a collection of early oral interpretations of the scriptures as compiled about A.D. 200) has a section on inheritance (Numbers 27:1-11; Deuteronomy 21:15ff.), to guide the rabbis when they were consulted. Jesus avoids family disputes over money. He instead points out the deleterious effects possessions can have on disciples.

14 He replied to him, “Friend, who appointed me as your judge and arbitrator?” 15 Then he said to the crowd, “Take care to guard against all greed, for though one may be rich, one’s life does not consist of possessions.”

Part of the polemic against false teachers was that they were greedy. He now warns His disciples about the futility of seeking refuge from opposition by amassing possessions.

16 Then he told them a parable. “There was a rich man whose land produced a bountiful harvest. 17 He asked himself, ‘What shall I do, for I do not have space to store my harvest?’

Note how frequently in this parable the rich fool uses “I” and “my.” His egotistical concerns eliminate God and neighbor from sight. It is lawful for a person to want to own what he needs for living, but if possession of material resources becomes an absolute, it spells the ultimate destruction of the individual and of society.

18 And he said, “This is what I shall do: I shall tear down my barns and build larger ones. There I shall store all my grain and other goods ¹⁹ and I shall say to myself, “Now as for you, you have so many good things stored up for many years, rest, eat, drink, be merry!” ²⁰ But God said to him, ‘You fool, this night your life will be demanded of you; and the things you have prepared, to whom will they belong?’

The death of the individual is a time of reckoning. With this punch line, the hearers are forced to ask the basic question: “What is life all about?”

21 Thus will it be for the one who stores up treasure for himself but is not rich in what matters to God.”

The answer to the question is: “Find the meaning in life by acknowledging God and giving alms to the needy.”

“A person who lives as if he were to die every day – given that our life is uncertain by definition – will not sin, for good fear extinguishes most of the disorder of our appetites; whereas he who thinks he has a long life ahead of him will easily let himself be dominated by pleasures” [Saint Athanasius (ca. A.D. 320-360), *Adversus Antigonum*]