

THE EMMAUS SERIES

18th Sunday Year C

Ecclesiastes 1:2; 2: 21-23

Colossians 3:1-5; 9-11

Luke 12:13-21

Be on your guard against avarice

All three readings of today's liturgy make reference to material possessions. Finances, property, possessions are indispensable for the living of our human lives. But a wrong attitude to these things can have disastrous consequences. The question from the 'man in the crowd', in the gospel reading, reminds us that disputes about inheritance can destroy families. The disastrous consequences of greed - the obsession to have more - in the lives of people - both the rich and the poor - are so subtle that they can easily be overlooked.

Ecclesiastes, from which the first reading comes, is one of the most unusual books of the bible. Its writer is not lacking in all that makes a good life in the eyes of the world; but for him, looking at things from a merely human point of view, life seems futile. His is the voice of humanity waiting for the truth Christ brings. He speaks, too, for those today who can find no meaning in life because they do not know Christ. This fullness of life and truth that Christ brings is enthusiastically expressed in the reading from Colossians. Human fulfilment will not be found in 'the things that are on the earth' alone, but in 'the life we have with Christ in God', in the 'glory' of a new heaven and a new earth.

The attitude the Christian should have to possessions is one of Luke's favourite themes. It is he who gives us the first beatitude in the challenging form, 'How blessed are you who are poor'. He is not praising material poverty; but declaring that those who know material poverty are those who are most likely to learn to rely upon their relationship with God, rather than upon the specious security that wealth brings. Today's gospel reading is the first part of a long passage that takes up this theme. The parable of Jesus, with which Luke begins, underlines the false sense of security brought by possessions. The wealthy farmer is not portrayed as being wicked. In fact, worldly wisdom would be inclined to say that he should be commended for his foresight. But in God's eyes, Jesus bluntly tells us, he is a 'fool'. The emptiness of his life is clear in the end – when God's call comes he has nothing that he can call his own. It is not what we have, but what we are that matters!

Because possessions are so important for our welfare and that of our families, this is not an easy lesson to learn. Paul's warning in today's reading from Colossians reinforces the lesson of the parable. In listing the kinds of conduct that are incompatible with our new life in Christ, he warns especially against 'greed, which is the same thing as worshipping a false god'. The comparison is a forceful one. The unbalanced pursuit of material things, he says, can take possession of a person, so that their life is built on a lie. Jesus concludes his parable with the same thought: 'make yourselves rich in the sight of God' – set your heart on what really matters; recognise what it is that you will take with you into eternal life. Luke's strong convictions in this matter lead him to conclude the continuation of this passage with these challenging words: 'Sell your possessions and give to those in need. Get yourself treasure that will not fail you'.

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