

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time C: July 31, 2022

"Thou fool! This very night thy life shall be required of thee!"

Perhaps it might be that you are not familiar with the Book of Ecclesiastes, a book in the Old Testament, which is rather smack-dab in the middle of the Old Testament. It is a short book, which can be read rather quickly, almost in a half or three quarters of an hour. It is a strange book to us these days, because it asks questions, but doesn't seem to answer the questions it raises. It begins rather darkly: *"Vanity of vanities! All things are vanity. What profit has a man from all the labour which he toils under the sun?"* The author, Qoheleth, goes on throughout the book, bemoaning man's fate: *"More weighty than wisdom or wealth is a little folly. The wise man's understanding turns him to his right; the fool's understanding turns him to his left."* (Eccl. 10. 1-2). In case you're wondering why I am mentioning this strange book, it is because our first reading today is taken from the Book of Ecclesiastes.

However, there is a strange link between our first reading to the Gospel of St. Luke as well, though it is not apparent. In our Gospel we find Our Lord teaching among the crowd, when suddenly a man cries out, *"Teacher, tell my brother to give me my share of our inheritance,"* to which Jesus responds: *"Friend, who has set me up as your judge or arbiter."* (St. Luke 12. 13-14) The great Biblical scholar, Fr. Breen, points out that this is the first time that we know of that Our Lord refused to grant a request. That is to say, Jesus had done so many things: He had healed the sick; given sight to the blind; we shall see with poor Lazarus that He shall even raise the very dead to life; but here, the Lord says 'no.' (1) It is our task to find out why the Lord refuses to intervene.

Why would Jesus refuse to arbitrate between the two brothers who were quarreling? Is not Our Lord the Prince of Peace? Let's take a moment to look at what was happening when the man asked Jesus – or should I say – interrupted Jesus – in His preaching. Our Gospel begins with the thirteenth verse of the twelfth chapter of St. Luke's Gospel. If we go back just a few verses, to the eleventh verse, we find:

When they bring you before synagogues, rulers and authorities, do not worry about how to defend yourselves or what to say. The Holy Spirit will teach you at that moment all that should be said. (St. Luke 12. 11-12)

Jesus is giving them a teaching on being prepared for difficult times ahead, a sort of 'calling-to-arms' for the time when He will not be with them, or, rather, when His presence will be hidden, hidden in the Eucharist, and manifest in a new way in and through His Spirit, poured forth through and after Pentecost.

Suddenly, in the midst of this catechesis, the Lord is interrupted by a man who has other things on his mind. Certainly the man's problems are important... but are they of such import to interrupt the Teacher here... and now?! As Fr. Breen would say: *"It was the Lord of Heaven that was there before him, and he should have asked something better than the mere adjustment of a temporal inheritance."* (2) The man's timing, his whole might and main and mind were simply off. Imagine, if you will, if the Lord were to appear to one of us as He appeared to our good friend, St. Faustina, and all we could say to Him was, *"Can You help me with my inheritance tax?!"* How do you think Our Lord would feel? You might respond: *"But that's too easy!"* In fact, the problem is, it's just that easy. Period.

The fact of the matter is, Our Lord was preparing men for eternal life and the man interrupted Him to discuss matters about *property*; thus the words of Jesus: *"I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."* (St. John 10. 11) It is, of course, true that you and I live in the world, and matters about property, money, taxes, are all important. But, the fact remains, they are not *all important*. Their importance is *relative*. Thus, the question remains, what is the most important thing? Eternal life.

Our first reading from the Book of Ecclesiastes is interesting because the author, Qoheleth is struggling with the meaning of life, and, in the end, he doesn't really seem to find it. Why? Because at that stage of development in the Jewish Faith, there was no real, complete understanding of eternal life or Heaven. Rather, what was hoped for was to be buried with the bones of one's ancestors, and, too, for some sort of life lived out in one's children and in one's children's children. If you take the time to read this book, you will see that it is rather worldly (in the best sense of the word) and rather *homey*, espousing *cupboard* joys:

There is nothing better for man than to eat and drink and provide himself with good things by his labours. Even this, I realized, is from the hand of God. (Eccl. 2. 24)

For every man, ... to eat and drink and enjoy the fruit of all his labour is a gift of God. (3. 15)

Any man to whom God gives riches and property, and grants power to partake of them, so that he receives his lot and finds joy in the fruits of his toil, has received a gift of God. (5. 18)

And here is my favourite!

Therefore I commend mirth, because there is nothing good for man under the sun except eating and drinking and mirth: for this is the accompaniment of his toil during the limited days of the life which God gives him under the sun. (8. 15)

Could it be that our feverish friend in the Gospel, so concerned about his property, was one of those Jews who did not believe very much in eternal life (i.e., one of the class of the Sadducees)? If such is the case, we cannot seriously fault the man at this point for his lack of knowledge concerning Heaven and hell. Rather, from our viewpoint as Christians, we recognize the inerrant nature of the Book of Ecclesiastes and understand that the Lord is calling this man to higher things, to a nobler reality. And, indeed, we see that the goods portrayed in the Book of Ecclesiastes are a shadow of a greater good to come in the Person of Jesus, Who grants us Eternal Life in the world to come, that is, Heaven.

The question that needs be asked here is: What is the goal of the human person? Ultimately, the goal of the human person is happiness. But, as St. Thomas Aquinas has so rightly pointed out, we become confused as to what that happiness consists in. Some say pleasure, some say riches, others say power. I suppose the answer is as varied as there are men in the world. However, the only thing that can make man truly happy is that reality which corresponds to his being. And what is man? Man is the being who is an enfleshed spirit or spiritualized flesh. We know that our flesh, our humanity, will one day die. But our spirit, our soul, that is, the higher part of our being which we share with both the Angels and God, Himself, *that part* of us shall never die. Our soul is immortal.

The devil does what he can to make us forget that fact. But that fact simply will not go away. If you think about it for just a second, when everything is quiet, the fact of our *mortality, that we shall die*, often comes flooding in upon us. If we are foolish, we try to flee from this fact. Indeed, our society does its best to hide everything about death away from us. Our very language betrays us. Heaven forbid that we say the word 'die.' Today it has become the fashion to say: "So-and-so has passed." Personally, I have **no** intention of passing. I have **every intention** of dying. Please God and Our Lady I shall make a good death in the state of grace, attended by a priest with the sacraments of Holy Mother Church.

When I was preparing my notes to write this article, I was stunned by the following words of Fr. Breen:

The message of Jesus is clear, but men turn aside from it to form gigantic trusts, mergers, pools and corporations, as though man were a Colossus who owned the world, and who were to remain here always. There is reflected on all sides that hard, cold pride of wealth, and the absence of Christian humility and supernaturalism. The power of the world is certainly growing alarming in proportion, and is stifling the spiritual in man. Everything is being done to protect man's present life, to render it immune from disease, and to preserve it, and little is being done for the soul. Even religion is made pleasant and entertaining, and lying prophets announce that which will please this materialistic age. (3)

You may ask, "Why was I stunned to read these words?" Read them over again, slowly. Fr. Breen wrote these words in the year 1908!

Let us do our work well. Indeed, it is a good thing to work, to eat, and drink and be merry – the Scripture tells us so. But let us never forget the *more*, indeed, *the most important thing*. Why are we here? We are here to find Eternal Life in Jesus Christ. Anything that takes us away from that path must go. An old prayer entitled "The Universal Prayer for All Things Necessary of Salvation" spells it out quite well:

Discover to me, O my God, the nothingness of this world, the greatness of Heaven, the shortness of time and the length of eternity.

1. Fr. A. E. Breen, Ph.D., D.D., *A Harmonized Exposition of the Four Gospels*, vol. 3 of 4, John P. Smith Printing Co., Rochester, N.Y., pg. 315
2. *Ibid.*, pg. 316
3. *Ibid.*, pg. 319