

18th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)
(Ecclesiastes 1:2; 2:21-23 / Luke 12:13-21)
31.07.2022
Rich for himself, rich in the sight of God

“So it is when a man stores up treasure for himself in place of making himself rich in the sight of God.”

This last verse of our Gospel reading is essential for us to arrive at the right understanding of the story just heard.

Without it, we could conclude that we should not be rich, that we cannot “take it easy, eat, drink and have a good time.” In order to reassure all of us, it is important to say that sometimes, it is wise for us to take it easy, and on occasion, it is good to eat, drink and have a good time. Jesus’ point is not to make us sad, and unable to enjoy life. In fact according to the Gospel we are meant to be rich but, as we heard it said in the lectionary translation of today’s Gospel text: “rich in the sight of God.”

What does it mean to be “rich in the sight of God”? The meaning of this expression is not very clear. Most translators opt for: “rich towards God” (NRSV). But here again: what does it mean to be “rich towards God”?

In his translation, Eugene Peterson helps us to see what really is at stake in this story. Peterson writes: “That’s what happens when you fill your barn with Self and not with God.” The problem of the rich man is not that he is rich, but that he is completely self-centred. All that he has, all that he is, is about himself. St Luke tells us that “he thought to himself”, and that he stored “treasure for himself.” Then the words *I* and *my* are repeated eleven times in 4 verses. The man had big barns to match the dimensions of his big ego... an ego which so filled his whole life that it left no space for God or for others. This man was his main concern, he thought of himself as a self-made man, he was literally full of himself. In fact he made an idol of himself.

The drama of this rich man is that he ends up living in splendid isolation. His greediness was a futile attempt to make himself feel happy and secure, but because he put himself at the centre of everything, he was alone and poor.

The lesson we can draw from this story is that the only way for us to be alive, to know abundance of life, is to be in relationship with God, with others and with ourselves. Relationships, real encounters and walking the path of life with others... this is what makes us rich and alive. These things empower us, they help us learn and grow. Pope Francis reminds us that “no one can mature or find fulfilment by withdrawing from others” and that we are called to grow “in a greater sense of mutual belonging.” (*Fratelli...*, n. 95)

The cold hearted withdrawal from others, the proud self-absorption that we have seen played out in the Brexit process or, in a different context, in the present violent invasion of Ukraine are 2 extreme signs of the same dynamic: the exaltation of the ego at the expense of relationships based on generosity, mutual respect and understanding.

The same negative dynamic is at work in our families and Christian communities when we identify with ideologies and habits, when we make an idol of our ego, when we give in to fears and become materialistic. When we are far from God, when we are cut off from others and disconnected from ourselves, life withers and we are left barely surviving. What makes our lives secure and meaningful is the way in which we relate to God, to others and to ourselves.

We all have to revisit the list of our priorities, we all need to examine what we consider as important, we all need to ask ourselves whether what is at the top of our list really helps us to relate to God, to others and to ourselves in a life-giving way.

The first step required of us is to be truthful, true to ourselves. In Christian terms we would speak of humility, this virtue makes us acknowledge who we truly are: made in the image of the Trinity, we are made for communion, communion with God and with one another. We cannot become truly human without being in Christ and with others.

Peace, security, happiness, meaning, fruitfulness... all these things that we long for will be given to us when we are living members of the Body of Christ. For us Christians, in all the areas of our lives, at a political, material or spiritual level, all that we have, decide, choose, or receive has an impact on all the other members of the Body. Not one of us is our own, not one of us belongs entirely to him or herself. God has created us intentionally, not to be individuals, but to be persons in communion. We grow and mature in the company of others. Ultimately the goal and meaning of our existence is found in relationships not in self-reliance.

The Covid pandemic and the individualistic trends which mark our time pose real threats to our growth in humanity. They promote what Pope Francis calls “a culture of indifference”, and he encourages us to “work and ask for the grace to build a culture of encounter, this encounter that returns to each person their dignity as children of God” (*Meditation* 13.09.2016).

Through Christ, our heavenly Father has enriched us in every way (cf. 1Co1:5), may we be known by having at heart the desire to be men and women of communion, generous, ready to share the love that makes us living beings.