

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time – July 31st 2022

A Reflection by Fr Sylvester O’Flynn OFM Cap., Rochestown, Cork

Blessed are the Poor in Spirit

A man in the crowd asked Jesus to plead with his brother over sharing an inheritance. Jesus replied, “My friend, who appointed me your judge, or the arbitrator of your claims?” (Luke 12:13). Jesus heard not only his plea but also the inner voice of a soul too concerned about material possessions. “Watch, and be on your guard against avarice of any kind, for a man’s life is not made secure by what he owns, even when he has more than what he needs.” In today’s Second Reading, Paul says that greed is the same thing as worshipping a false god.

Jesus then followed up with his favourite way of teaching, telling a story, the parable of a rich farmer who could think of nothing else but further expansion. He went so far as to say to his soul: “My soul, you have plenty of good things laid by for many years to come; take things easy, eat, drink, have a good time.”

There is a unique feature in this parable as it is the only parable in which God speaks. And what is the first word from God? “Fool!” In those times, calling a person a fool referred to more than low intelligence. It meant a denial of God. “The fool has said in his heart there is no God.”

Saint Paul reminded the people of Corinth of the example of Jesus: “Although he was rich, he became poor for your sake, so that you should become rich through his poverty” (2 Cor 8:9). He was born in a borrowed stable. The offering at his Presentation in the temple was that of the poor, two turtle doves rather than a lamb. As a baby he suffered the poverty of enforced exile. In his public mission he depended on the support of kind people and sometimes had no bed for the night. He suffered the poverty of an unjust trial and was buried in a tomb donated by a friend. The earliest followers were noted for pooling their possessions in a spirit of Christian Communism.

The Sermon on the Mount is the Charter of Christian Life

At the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus proclaimed that his mission was the establishment of the reign of God in our lives. The great sermon of Jesus on the mountain sets out the charter of Christian life. It begins with the eight beatitudes, the first being, “Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

There is a story in the gospel about a rich young man who asked Jesus what he should do to inherit eternal life. He was a religious man who observed the commandments. Jesus challenged him to share his possessions with the poor. At this, his face fell, and he went away sad because he was very rich. “How hard it is for those who are rich to enter the kingdom of heaven.” This man wanted to enter heaven but he was reluctant to allow the ideals of the kingdom of heaven to enter his life.

There is a form of Christianity misleading people by claiming that prosperity and success are signs that one is specially blessed by God. This prosperity gospel, sometimes called Cadillac Christianity, is a complete reversal of the example and teaching of Jesus.

A Church of the poor, for the poor

Nine years ago, the newly elected Pope chose to be known as Francis, a clear indication that his inspiration was Francis of Assisi who set out to observe the holy gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ. He brought to the papacy, not only book knowledge, but vast pastoral experience. As Archbishop of

Buenos Aires, he spent whatever time he could afford visiting the people who lived in the surrounding shanty towns. “This is why I want a Church which is poor and for the poor.” He marvelled at the depth of faith in many of these poor people, how in their difficulties they knew the suffering Christ. Their faith is not book knowledge but it is a knowing that enables them to say, “Christ in his poverty is one with us and we are one with him”. This is a religion of intimacy. Pope Francis urges us to embrace “the mysterious wisdom which God wishes to share with us through them” (*The Joy of the Gospel*, 198)^[1].”

Do we need all we want?

There is a difference between what we want and what we need. We need enough to pay the bills, have food on the table, a roof over our head, proper care of the family and sensible provision for the future. But many of the things we want go far beyond what we need. It often happens that once we get what we have wanted, another want takes over. It’s like the story of this man who knew that his wife had her eye on a fashionable handbag, so he bought it for her birthday. “Are you happy now, dear”, he asked. “No”, she replied, “I need matching shoes.” Ladies, no offence intended!

Many of the wealthiest people in the world are very insecure and always want more, while many who have simple, uncomplicated lives enjoy great peace and serenity. Be on your guard against any kind of avarice. The most valuable things in life are beyond the power of money.

Where do we stand today?

We have more wealth than years ago but less contentment: more choices on our menu but less commitment: more options open to us but less fidelity: more opportunities for development of life, yet more searching for a reason to live. Bigger houses and smaller families, advanced means of communication but more lonely hearts. We surf the net but only net the surf, never reaching the depths of life.

Maybe it’s time to change our priorities, to curtail our wants and to commit ourselves to eternal values.

Prayer

O God, the giver of every good gift, I thank you for the gift of life and all that comes with it.

Open my eyes to appreciate the ordinary gifts I take for granted.

Cleanse my heart of all jealousy and avarice.

Inspire me to be more generous for it is in giving that we receive.