

HOMILY. 18TH SUNDAY OF YEAR C August 4, 2013

We recently finished a book in the refectory reading on the life of Abraham Lincoln, extolling his political genius in his administration of the country during his presidency and the civil war. Lincoln was not brought up as a church goer of organized religion. As a young man he set for himself the goal to achieve such a place of greatness in his lifetime that it would insure remembrance of him for generations to come. This and other statements he made are interpreted by some to indicate that he did not believe in an afterlife such as Christian faith understands it, even though he knew the Bible well. Some scholars say that later in life he did come closer to belief in a life with God after this one. In any event he accomplished the goal he set for himself, for his memory is revered still nearly 150 years after his death and is likely to be remembered for centuries to come. There are others personages whose memory is imbedded in annals of history for a different kind of so-called greatness, by their ignoble lives, for the great harm and suffering they inflicted on many people. For common, ordinary folk, like most of us, unique personal remembrances of us may last for up to three or four generations. After that most are only a name on a birth certificate or on a tombstone. Does that make this brief life a vanity, just an empty show, full of futile effort with no lasting value, as we heard from the book of Ecclesiastes?

Whoever wrote that Old Testament book was very pessimistic about the meaning of human existence, if it has any meaning at all. No one can deny that the world as we experience it is full of contradictions and ambiguity, with its injustices, wars, genocides, its natural disasters, and its unequal distribution of goods and opportunities. Qoheleth bases some of his argument on the futility of a man laboring to accumulate wealth and property only to have it passed on to someone who does not appreciate it, preserve it and use it well, or to a fool who squanders it.

In the gospel when someone asks Jesus to intercede on his behalf in a family dispute over an inheritance, Jesus refused to get involved. We all know how sad and all too frequently it happens that heirs fight over the distribution of an inheritance, causing divisions in families that can remain unreconciled for a lifetime. Jesus took the occasion to teach all of us a life lesson: "Take care to guard against all greed... one's life does not consist of possessions." In the parable about the rich man and his super harvests Jesus echoes Qoheleth's argument when he challenges the rich man's plans for bigger barns and years of comfort: "You fool, this night your life will be demanded of you: and the things you have prepared, to whom will they belong?" But there is a major difference as we know. All of our restless searchings for happiness, for inner peace, for security are never satisfied here on earth. We long for something more than these transitory things can give. In generation after generation people's lives are as different as that of Dives and Lazarus, the rich and the many poor. Both die. Death is the great equalizer. If that is the end of unique personal existence, what difference does it make? Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die. Let the poor and oppressed scrap along as best they can.

Today's gospel closed with Jesus' words: "Thus will it be for all who store up treasure for themselves but are not rich in what matters to God". Being rich in what matters to God is the difference. Belief that there is a God, the source of all life, and that we are made in his image and likeness and destined for an eternal life give us a purpose in life that sees beyond the curtain of death. What matters to God is exactly what St. Paul writes about to the Colossians. When our daily life is hidden with Christ in God, when we give up our earthly tendencies to immorality, evil desires and greed, we begin to live a life that looks forward to the promises of Jesus in the revelations of the Father's plan for our salvation. That plan invites all of us to live this life free from its futility of seeking fulfillment, happiness, and security in earthly things. Instead we are invited to conform our ways to those of Jesus, the first born of all creation, the Beloved Son sent by God to be our Redeemer.

As Jesus urged in the Sermon on the Mount, "Stop worrying, then, over questions like, 'What are we to eat, or what are we to drink, or what are we to wear?' The unbelievers are always running after these things. You heavenly Father knows all that you need. Seek first his kingship over you, his way of holiness, and all these things will be given you besides. Enough, then, of worrying about tomorrow. Let tomorrow take care of itself. Today has troubles enough of its own."

Fortunately that rather bleak picture of our days on earth is not the whole story. For as we sang in the opening hymn:

“The kingdom of God is justice a n d j o y,
for Jesus restores what sin would destroy.
God’s power and glory in Jesus we know,
and here a n d h e r e a f t e r the kingdom shall grow.

St. Benedict urges us to keep death daily before our eyes. Then we will not be deceived by false securities of passing treasures. Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, unite ourselves with him in this sacrament of remembrance of his passion, death, and resurrection, and in his promise to be with us always. Where our heart is, there is our treasure. The closing verse of the entrance hymn sums up neatly today’s message about life’s goal and our true inheritance:

“God’s kingdom is come, the gift and t h e g o a l,
in Jesus begun, in heaven made whole;
the h e i r s o f t h e k I n g d o m shall answer his call,
and all things cry ‘Glory!’ to God all in all.