

Storing Up Treasures in Heaven

Biblical Reflection for 18th Sunday in Ordinary Time C

By Father Thomas Rosica, CSB

TORONTO, JULY 28, 2010 (Zenit.org).- In addition to setting the stage for Luke's Gospel parable on possessions and hoarding, today's first reading from Ecclesiastes (1:2; 2:21-23) drives home the fleeting nature of life and the inexorable passage of time with blunt realism: "Vanity of vanities [...] vanity of vanities, all is vanity" (1:2).

The word "vanity" usually refers to an excessive love of one's appearance, but in the book of Ecclesiastes it has a different meaning. The English word means "emptiness" or "nothing," so a "vanity of vanities" means something like "a complete waste of time." The author of Ecclesiastes calls himself "Qoheleth," which is translated "one who assembles" or "teacher." He is cynical about life, having lived a long time and seen the futility of much of his work. His book ends with a simple truth: The only worthwhile thing about life is the knowledge of God.

A parable on possessions and hoarding

In today's Gospel, Luke (12:13-21) has joined together sayings contrasting those whose focus and trust in life is on material possessions, symbolized by the rich fool of the parable (16-21), with those who recognize their complete dependence on God (21), those whose radical detachment from material possessions symbolizes their heavenly treasure (33-34).

The subject of coveting or hoarding arises because of a request of Jesus by someone in the crowd to intervene in a matter of inheritance. Jesus refuses and turns the conversation into a teaching against materialism. He illustrates this with a story about a prosperous farmer who decides to hoard his excess crops. The rich man decides to build extra barns or grain silos. Jesus seems to be suggesting that the farmer should have shared his extra grain with the poor.

The craving to hoard not only puts goods in the place of God, but it is an act of total disregard for the needs of others. The parable is not about the farmer's mistreatment of workers or any criminal actions on his part. The farmer is, in the end, careful and conservative. So if he is not unjust, what is he? The parable says he is a fool. He lives completely for himself. He only talks to himself, plans for himself and congratulates himself. His sudden death proves him to have lived as a fool. "For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?" (9:25).

Possessions and greed become more important than people. In other words, "possession fixation" is destructive of relationships. The man who interrupts Jesus' teaching is unaware of his inappropriate intrusion. He cannot connect appropriately with his outer world because of the urgency of his inner world and personal needs.

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Destructive power of possessions

Jesus uses this man's "possession fixation" to talk about something that can harm the soul. The man's family relationships are obviously in turmoil because of material possessions. Whoever depends solely on worldly goods will end up by losing, even though there might seem to be an appearance of success. Death will find that person with an abundance of possessions but having lived a wasted life (13-21).

To covet is to wish to get wrongfully what another possesses or to begrudge what God gave him. Jesus restates the commandment "do not covet," but he also states that a person's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions. Jesus probes the heart -- where is your treasure? Treasure has a special connection to the heart, the place of desire and longing, the place of will and focus. The thing we most set our heart on is our highest treasure.

Wealth and greed

In many societies, wealth is a sign of God's approval, and poverty and hardship are the signs of God's disapproval. Jesus does not say that being wealthy is wrong. True, Matthew, Mark and Luke all report Jesus' words, "It is harder for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God." But, Jesus does not say it is wrong to be rich. It is greed that is the culprit. Greed can turn the blessings of wealth into the burden of desire for more. Jesus' warning can properly be expressed as, "Be careful ... very careful ... that your possessions do not possess you. Life is not about things!"

Jesus' parable is a distinct warning that greed can lead to a point where life's meaning is reduced to material things. The driving force of living becomes a search for "more" -- a search for "things." Greed, in fact, breaks the commandment, "You shall have no other gods before me" and thus the statement in Colossians 3:5 (today's second reading): "Put to death, then, the parts of you that are earthly: immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and the greed that is idolatry."

Challenging the "prosperity gospel mentality"

The Gospel of Jesus challenges the "prosperity gospel mentality." Jesus is not speaking against material wealth, but condemns being enslaved to and enchained by wealth. It becomes a blessing when it is shared with others, and it becomes an obstacle and a prison for those who do not have the wisdom to share it with others.

We are not owners, but rather administrators, of the goods we possess: These, then, are not to be considered as our exclusive possession, but means through which the Lord calls each one of us to act as a steward of his providence for our neighbor. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us, material goods bear a social value, according to the principle of their universal destination (No. 2404).

Storing up "treasures in heaven" does not mean setting out to make sure of a place in heaven. It means relying on God as the source of our security. It means having a genuine and sincere relation with God who knows us, accepts us, and gives meaning to our lives. It means having God as the singular object of our "heart." We are totally committed to seeking out God's kingdom, confident that God will provide us with what we truly need (Matthew 6:33). If we have the Lord as our "treasure," then there is nothing more we need desire. We can forego anything else.

Making room for God

One year ago, Benedict XVI published his third encyclical letter, "Caritas in Veritate," on integral human development in charity and truth. Paragraph 11 of that letter addresses the essence of today's Gospel parable: "Without the perspective of eternal life, human progress in this world is denied breathing-space. Enclosed

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within history, it runs the risk of being reduced to the mere accumulation of wealth; humanity thus loses the courage to be at the service of higher goods, at the service of the great and disinterested initiatives called forth by universal charity. Man does not develop through his own powers, nor can development simply be handed to him. In the course of history, it was often maintained that the creation of institutions was sufficient to guarantee the fulfillment of humanity's right to development.

"Unfortunately, too much confidence was placed in those institutions, as if they were able to deliver the desired objective automatically. In reality, institutions by themselves are not enough, because integral human development is primarily a vocation, and therefore it involves a free assumption of responsibility in solidarity on the part of everyone. Moreover, such development requires a transcendent vision of the person, it needs God: without him, development is either denied, or entrusted exclusively to man, who falls into the trap of thinking he can bring about his own salvation, and ends up promoting a dehumanized form of development. Only through an encounter with God are we able to see in the other something more than just another creature, to recognize the divine image in the other, thus truly coming to discover him or her and to mature in a love that 'becomes concern and care for the other.'"

Showing one another the Lord's kindness

Finally, let us make the words of St. Gregory Nazianzen our own this week: "Brethren and friends, let us by no means be wicked stewards of God's gift to us. If we are, we will have to listen to Saint Peter saying: Be ashamed, you who hold back what belongs to another, take as an example the justice of God, and no one will be poor.

"While others suffer poverty, let us not labor to hoard and pile up money, for if we do, holy Amos will threaten us sharply in these words: Hear this, you who say; Where will the new moon be over, that we may sell; and the Sabbath, that we may open up our treasures?"

"Let us imitate the first and most important law of God who sends his rain on the just and on sinners and makes the sun shine on all men equally. God opens up the earth, the springs, the streams and the woods to all who live in the world. He gives the air to the birds, the water to the fish, and the basic needs of life abundantly to all, without restriction or limitation or preference. These basic goods are common to all, provided by God generously and with nothing lacking. He has done this so that creatures of the same nature may receive equal gifts and that he may show us how rich is his kindness."

[The readings for the 18th Sunday of Ordinary Time are Ecclesiastes 1:2; 2:21-23; Colossians 3:1-5, 9-11; Luke 12:13-21]

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Basilian Father Thomas Rosica, chief executive officer of the Salt and Light Catholic Media Foundation and Television Network in Canada, is a consultant to the Pontifical Council for Social Communications. He can be reached at: rosica@saltandlighttv.org.

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