

VANITY OF VANITIES! ALL THINGS ARE VANITY!

Today's Scripture is certainly counter-cultural. It is counter-cultural because it tells us so clearly that the true quality of life in the world is not to be found in money and material possessions.

Today's first reading says that concern for material possessions is vanity. Utter futility. In the second reading, St Paul says: If then you were raised with Christ, seek what is above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Think of what is above, not of what is on earth. And in the Gospel, Jesus says, "Take care to guard against all greed, for though one may be rich, one's life does not consist of possessions."

We must enter into the serious considerations to which these Scriptures call us. It is a question of attitude; it is a question of our priorities, a question of what is most important to us, a question of what we are ultimately concerned about, of what principally determines our way of looking at things and our way of acting.

This is not a condemnation of wealth but a new way of relating to possessions. Too often this Gospel might make us defensive as if we are doing something wrong if we seek a well-paying job and have a good home and save enough money for the children's education and one's own retirement. But this is not so. Physically we know that we need adequate food, drink, and shelter. The question is: what attitude do we have toward possessions?

The rich man has a problem that would be the envy of any farmer: a harvest greater than he can handle. Immediately he decides to hoard the entire harvest so that he can "rest, eat, drink, be merry" for many years (Luke 12:19) Note that he repeatedly says, "I shall," assuming that he is in control of the situation. He seems to have ignored the adjective that describes his harvest. As Jesus says, it is a bountiful harvest. A bounty is something that is given generously and received undeservedly. Why did it not occur to him to give generously himself, to share it with others who did not deserve it? What's more, the bountiful harvest was produced by the land, the sun, and the rain. What made him feel entitled to take it all for himself? To share generously from our bounty is to become rich in imitation of God.

You may have heard this story before, but it's worth repeating. An American tourist, traveling to Europe, paid a visit to a famous wise and holy Rabbi who lived there. The American was surprised when he saw how simple the man lived-in a single room with only books and a table and chair. "Rabbi! Where is your furniture?" asked the tourist. "Where is yours?" the rabbi asked. The American tourist answered, "My furniture? I'm only passing through here." The wise rabbi responded: "So am I!"

We are living in a very self-centered society. As Christians can we be an opposing force to this individualistic mentality? Can we work to change the actual situation in society? How can I be a more generous person?

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