

Homily for the Eighteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year C) 1st August 2010

The people who first heard Jesus tell this story would find our society, our way of living, utterly incomprehensible. For them, material well-being meant having enough food to survive, and wealth meant having far more than enough to survive. For those of us who live in the West, the link between wealth and survival has long since disappeared; riches are no longer measured in the size of our barns, but in ever more complex consumer goods, electrical items, cars and houses, branded clothes and holidays. For the most part, these are not things that we really need; often they are not even things that we really want. There are plenty of people who live in a particular place, or drive a particular car, or wear particular clothes, not because they particularly want or even like them, but because it gives them a sense of identity, a sense of belonging, a sense that they are a part of a group. The things they possess give them a sense of who they are.

The readings at today's mass invite us to reflect on our own lives, and to ask ourselves: to what extent is my identity, my sense of who I am, my sense of self-worth, tied up with what I possess? This is not a question that we feel very comfortable addressing, so we tend to skip over it, or to find ways of pretending that it doesn't really apply to us, but today we must resist that temptation. If I no longer had my house, my car, my possessions and whatever status they may give (or appear to give) would I be the same person? The writer of Ecclesiastes confronts us with this question. All our struggles to acquire things, our fretful days and our restless nights are so much vanity – or, as the Hebrew apparently can also be translated, they are 'wisps of straw', insubstantial things, too fragile to be built with, so easily rotted, so vulnerable to a capricious gust of wind.

In the gospel Jesus introduces his parable with these words: 'A man's life is not made secure by what he owns'. This is something we need to hear again and again. If I lost everything I own, what would I be? Would I be the same person? If I must answer that my sense of who I am does indeed depend on what I possess, this explains the sense of fear that underpins so much of our modern world. We fear losing what we have, because we believe that this will destroy our very selves, and this has a profound influence on how we behave towards other people. However we deal with them in public, in private we always see them as competitors, as threats who might either acquire more than we have, or even take what we have, and thus they are threats to our very selves.

St Paul writes to the Colossians about 'true life' and about real human identity. He explains what it is to be really human. Baptised into Christ, the Colossians find that the life of Christ, the person of Christ, his identity, has been overlaid onto their own selves. It is as if a transparency that bears the image of Christ has been laid on top of my picture – I am still there, but now I carry his identity as well as my own. Jesus Christ shows us perfect human life; in Jesus we see what human life lived to the full, lived as it was always meant to be, is truly like. So my real identity, what actually matters about me, is the way in which the life of Christ can be seen in my life. The more the image of Christ can be seen in my life,

the more all the other little differences between me and other people pale into insignificance. That is why Paul says there is no distinction between Greek and Jew, and so on – the more strongly the image of Christ is marked on each one of us, the more all the little incidental differences fade into the background.

So, today's readings ask us a direct question. What is it that makes me who I am? There are two possibilities. It might be all the things that I own, but that is not a comfortable way to live because it leaves me always fearful, always vulnerable; I may never live long enough to eat all that my barns can contain; or it may be that what makes me who I am depends on how like Christ I am, in which case the things that really matter can never be taken from me (although, of course, I might decide to give them up). This distinction helps us to see material possessions in their true light. Are the things I own something that leads me to a false sense of what really matters in life – would I feel diminished as a person if I did not have them? If so, they are a danger to me. I would like to read you here a short passage from the Diary of Etty Hillesum, a young Dutch Jewish woman who wrote this in 1942, the year before she died in Auschwitz. This passage was written when she had just a few days of freedom left to her, and it takes the form of a prayer addressed to God.

'Alas, there doesn't seem to be much you yourself can do about our circumstances, about our lives. Neither do I hold you responsible. You cannot help us, but we must help You and defend Your dwelling place inside us to the last. There are, it is true, some who, even at this late stage, are putting their vacuum cleaners and silver forks and spoons in safe keeping instead of guarding You, dear God. And there are those who want to put their bodies in safe keeping but who are nothing more now than a shelter for a thousand fears and bitter feelings. And they say 'I shan't let them get me into their clutches.' But they forget that no one is in their clutches who is in Your arms.'

Jesus ends his parable by distinguishing those who store up treasure for themselves from those who make themselves rich in the sight of God. We are made rich in the sight of God by living fully human lives, lives which are more and more like the perfect human life, the life of Jesus. So we must ponder that unsettling question once again: to what extent is my identity, my sense of who I am, my sense of self-worth, tied up with what I possess? How can I focus less on this, and more on putting on my new self, the self which is the image of Jesus Christ, because this alone is the way to security and happiness. Anything that leads us away from this is vanity, a wisp of straw blowing in the wind.