

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time C
Ecc 1:2; 2:21-23; Col 3:1-5, 9-11; Lk 12:13-21
July 31 2022

During the first year (2001) of the George W. Bush Administration, many people faced a difficult ethical question. It had nothing to do with stem cell research, abortion, or the death penalty. It was a more immediate question: What to do with that tax rebate, or advance refund, many had received as a result of tax cuts? Although for most people the check was relatively small, it presented at least a small opportunity to reflect on the issue raised in today's Gospel: our attitude toward wealth.

The man in today's Gospel who asked Jesus to act as judge in a dispute over an inheritance was concerned about wealth. He may have had a legitimate basis for seeking arbitration. Jewish law at the time provided that children were entitled to the inheritance of their father. It was to be divided among them, with the oldest receiving a double portion. The others divided the remaining third equally. Perhaps in this case the man complaining was seeking a larger share of the estate than he had been given.

The request the man makes for Jesus to settle the dispute was not unusual. It was common practice in Palestine at the time for such disputes to be decided by a rabbi and the man's request of Jesus is one indication that he was a respected religious leader. Jesus' response shows he was much more than that.

Why then did Jesus refuse to arbitrate this inheritance dispute? The simple answer is that the man was in the wrong court.

The man had raised a question that belonged in the courts of this world and Jesus responded to him from a higher court, the Kingdom of God, which Jesus proclaimed is in our midst. This is not to say that Jesus did not see the need for judges, maybe even lawyers. But Jesus knew he was not that kind of judge.

The mission of Jesus was not to resolve ordinary worldly disputes, which any magistrate could do, but to raise questions that are ultimately more important. In this case, it is the question of greed, the excessive desire for material things. Jesus raises the question whether our attitude toward wealth has something to do with our relationship to God.

The example of the rich man shows that it does. Here was a man, a farmer, although he could have been a doctor, lawyer, teacher, nurse, engineer or some other profession. He was the equivalent of a modern-day stock trader whose investment has suddenly increased beyond his wildest imagination. But then, he dies. When he comes before God, he hears words that should give us pause, “*You fool!*” Can you imagine receiving that verdict about your life? Jesus does not suggest that the man erred; he says so in bold, uncompromising language, “*You fool!*”

It was not success that made the man foolish. He may have worked hard for what he had, but his good fortune was not the problem. The problem was his attitude toward what he had been given. Recall his words, “*This is what I shall do: I shall tear down my barns ... I shall store my grain and other goods ... I shall say to myself.*” It is all capital ‘I’.

The man forgot that he was only a steward of the land; he forgot his neighbors who could have benefited from his surplus, he forgot God. The psalmist says, “*Fools say in their hearts, “There is no God above.” (Ps 14:1).*

The man forgot that God is more interested in what we are, than what we have.

Jesus uses the story to show that our attitude toward wealth is critical to our spiritual well being. Jesus teaches that it is not material things in themselves that impede our journey to God.

It is our attitude toward them, it is the greed, the excessive desire for things: wealth, power, recognition, security, that stand in our way and that must be overcome if we are to fully realize the kind of life Jesus made possible. It is not the necessities of life that are at issue, these God will always provide, but rather the surplus, the wealth. To the extent we are preoccupied, or consumed by concern for wealth, we cannot share fully in the Kingdom of God.

We live in a wealthy country. Although we may not think so, we are the wealthiest people in the world. The homes we live in, ordinary homes, would be considered mansions by the vast majority of people in the world. We are a wealthy people, and we are somewhat uncomfortable with that fact. We are so wealthy, we can return thirty-eight billion dollars to taxpayers while ignoring human needs around the world. In her weekly column, Boston Globe columnist Ellen Goodman in 2001 described the intense debate that developed on the Internet concerning the tax rebates and how they should be used.

She described attitudes across the spectrum, from returning the money to pay down the national debt to spending it on food banks and textbooks. Web sites were even established to make

possible this debate and received thousands of hits. Each of us in a small way was part of that debate.

How do we settle modern day disputes over inheritances such as the one our government gave? The answer depends upon each person's circumstances, but perhaps a good starting point is to reflect deeply on today's Gospel. Perhaps what is needed is to reflect prayerfully on our own attitude toward wealth and to ask ourselves whether our attitude is in some way an obstacle to our entering more fully into the Kingdom of God.

- Fr. Stephen Lattner, O.S.B.