

18th Sunday of Ordinary Time “Quoheleth”

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I love the book of Ecclesiastes. Some call it the book of Quoheleth, after the main character of Ecclesiastes. Quoheleth means assembly person or Church man. Because of the references from Quoheleth as having been a king and rich beyond reckoning, tradition has linked Quoheleth with King Solomon, the son of David and the wisest and richest king of Israel.

Bishop Barron has an interesting take on this guy in a homily from a number of years back. This weekend, I am essentially going to paraphrase it for you. He began with the observation that most of us know someone like Quoheleth. He comes across like a grumpy old neighbor on his worst, cynical day. Quoheleth sees the world through a very jaundiced eye. “Vanity of Vanities”, says Quoheleth, “all things are vanity.” He is cynical, he is sardonic, and he sounds almost desperate. Everything he has done, everything he has learned, everything he has accomplished, he sees as vain. He writes that he spent his life chasing after wisdom and discovered that it was like chasing after the wind. Now King Solomon was considered to be the wisest of the kings of Israel. Here, he is almost like a Socrates figure. He is essentially saying wisdom consists in knowing you know nothing. Have you heard the saying, there is nothing new under the sun? Well, that saying comes from Quoheleth in the book of Ecclesiastes.

How about sensual pleasure? At the end of his life, Quoheleth dismisses even pleasure as vanity. King Solomon had all the food, drink and wives he ever wanted. He was a king and all that a king needed to do was clap his hands and he would get whatever he wanted whenever he wanted it. Sounds like the American dream, huh? Quoheleth had everything he wanted and ultimately dismissed pleasure as being superficial, passing, and vain.

How about great works? Solomon performed great public works, he built the temple, and he built great public places. In the end, they too all turn to dust eventually. And, as it turned out, all that is left of the ancient temple in Jerusalem is the Western Wall. How about wealth? Quoheleth says he had all the slaves he wanted and had all the human luxuries at his beck and call. Indeed, Solomon was reputed to be the wealthiest man in the entire world. In the end, he discovered that chasing wealth is like chasing after the wind. Like the words of Jesus in the Gospel, “take care to guard against all greed, for though one may be rich, one’s life does not consist in possessions.”

Now, why are we listening to Quoheleth? Why are we listening to this cranky old man? We are listening to him because, despite his jadedness, there is profound wisdom here that we should listen to. Is there anything wrong with attaining wisdom? No. Is there anything wrong with sensual pleasure in itself, being wealthy or performing great public works? No. Catholics are not puritans. Wisdom, pleasure, wealth and accomplishments are good things most of the time and we Catholics affirm good things in the world. However, and this is the main point I want you to consider from today’s scriptures, when

we rely on such things for our ultimate happiness in life, we end up in serious trouble. This is what Quothelth is trying to say to us. Wisdom, pleasure, wealth and accomplishments, although good, are nevertheless nothing compared to God who is the Supreme Good.

So if I say to myself, “Oh Lord, I need to accomplish more so to have more wealth so I can have more pleasure in life”, Quothelth would say I am deluding myself. At the end of my days, everything I do or accomplish will turn to dust, and I would have spent my life chasing after wind. If, however, I base temporal goods and pleasures in right relationship with eternal goods, the ultimate good being a relationship with God, the vocation God gave me, and the care of the souls around me, then wealth and pleasure will find their right relationship, balance and purpose.

And so, we can ask ourselves this week: what activities do I fill up my calendar with? Am I trying to build up God’s kingdom on earth or am I trying to build up my kingdom? Can we find joy in applying our wealth for activities that would please God? Do we care for the poor? Are we generous to those in need? Are we wise stewards of our resources or are we maxing out our credit cards on things that turn to dust? Do we find pleasure in activities that God pleasures in? Or, do we take pleasure in activities that may seem pleasurable in the moment but ultimately are destructive behaviors in the long run? You see, I think Quothelth has something to say to us today.

What he is saying is this: at the end of our days, it will not matter how much money we have or how many accomplishments we have performed. When we are in a hospital bed, a fancy car or house isn’t going to hold our hand. Diamonds do not shed tears and gold feels cold on the skin. What feels warm on the skin are the hands, hugs and kisses of those who love us. In those moments, we will realize like Quothelth that what matters most in life is our relationship to God, our family, our friends and community. Anything else is lesser treasure.

And so, my friends, if we want the secret to happiness in life, if that is what we are seeking right now, a secret to being happy, we only need to listen to St. Paul today. What does St. Paul say? He says if you want to be happy, “Think of what is above, not of what is on earth.” “Think of what is above, not of what is on earth.” My friends, if we take the Gospel reading today seriously and then recite the Lord’s Prayer correctly, praying “thy will be done” rather than “my will be done”, temporal goods in this world will be placed in their proper context, we will have treasure in heaven, and our inner Quothelth might be surprised by hope.