

Homily for the 18th Sunday in Ordinary Time

“The Ultimately Wise Investment”

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 2:21–23

Psalm 90:3–6, 12–13

Colossians 3:1–5, 9–11

Luke 12:13–21

Comedian Jack Benny, from TV’s Golden age, had a skit which illustrated how we place money ahead of everything. He is walking down the street when suddenly he is approached by an armed robber, "Your money or your life!" There is a long pause. Jack does nothing. The robber impatiently queried, "Well?" Jack replied, "Don't rush me, I'm thinking, I'm thinking."

This evening I would like us to think a few moments about our money and our life. All too frequently we choose our money over our life. Because our lives are surrounded with passing things; it is easier for us to set our hearts on them than on the things of heaven. And yet to set our soul’s desire on earthly things can never satisfy because the soul was made for eternity.

This was brought home to me on my recent visit to Montreal.

While there I went to the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. There is currently an exhibit called “Pompeii”. It immerses visitors in the daily life of this Roman town before the cataclysmic eruption of Mount Vesuvius on August 24, 79 A.D.

In the first century A.D., Pompeii was a thriving city on the coast of what was not yet Italy. Wealthy Romans owned vacation villas there, and Pompeii was a major import/export city. Languages from the four corners of the known world could be heard on every street, and trade of all kinds took place in the open - and behind closed doors. Pompeii had the largest Amphitheatre in the known Roman Empire, immense sports arenas, its own vineyards, four luxurious bath houses, and temples to ten different deities.

This motto of the ancient Pompeiians was discovered when the city was excavated in the 18th century:

"enjoy life while you have it - for tomorrow is uncertain"

The exhibition culminates with a multimedia re-creation of the volcanic eruption that buried Pompeii under metres of ash for centuries. Ash that unearthed in the 18th Century a town remarkably well preserved thus giving us real insight into what life was like there on August 24, 79 A.D.

What struck me was how sudden the good life came to an end for the people of Pompeii. And while the motto

"enjoy life while you have it for tomorrow is uncertain"

might be a motto to live by, it sure isn't a motto to die by.

In our reading from Luke's Gospel we read of a wealthy man who would have fit right into life in Pompeii. He had some very good years and his crops were thriving. We could say, in modern terms, his investments had done so well that it was time to celebrate with major upward mobility. Down came the old barns and up went barns that were unparalleled in their splendor. Walking around his property he was having a great conversation with himself.

Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.

Yes he would have fit right into life in Pompeii. He was going to enjoy his life. He anticipated there were many years before him to celebrate the "good life." His motto, "Relax, eat, drink and be merry is one found elsewhere in the Bible. St. Paul also quotes these words of the rich man when in 1 Corinthians 15 he states:

If the dead are not raised, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die."

When we lose a sense of the presence of God and when the belief that with death comes the end, then why not live by the philosophy:

"Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die."

"enjoy life while you have it for tomorrow is uncertain"

And yet, listen carefully to Saint Paul. If the dead are not raised this is a motto to live by. If we do not have an immortal soul than to invest only in this world seems prudent and obvious.

However, in light of the Resurrection, and in light of how suddenly death can come knocking, as the Mount Vesuvius irruption so vividly shows us, to live by the values of Pompeii and the rich man is fool's gold.

Just as the man was talking to himself and commending his soul on his prosperity, God interrupts and announces:

"Fool tonight your soul is demanded of you, whose will this be?"

The verb "demanded" has implied the sense that something has to be returned, something that has been on loan is now being reclaimed by its rightful owner. The truth is that our souls have not been given to us to be pampered and spoilt as the fool with deep pockets thought. No, the years of our earthly life are to be spent investing in what matters for eternity. This is because our soul is not ours but God's. When we come to see this it changes everything including our life motto. Rather than saying

"enjoy life while you have it for tomorrow is uncertain"

we are learning to say:

Life in short and uncertain while the eternal accounting of our soul is certain, so invest in God

Jesus wants us to understand the real life of a man is not dependent on his possessions; hence avarice is dangerous, since it leads a person to direct his aim to the wrong things in life and to ignore what really matters, namely being rich towards God.

Jesus says to us all today:

Take heed, and beware of all covetousness; for a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."

This verb, "Take heed" is the accentuated with the verb "beware". Each of us has to pay special attention to how the lure of wealth and its counterfeit belief that life's meaning is about material acquisition can deceive us all.

Listen now to one who had made this his primary aim. In our Old Testament Lesson from Ecclesiastes we have the words of one who was wealthy beyond imagining. And just before today's appointed reading he says:

"Come now, I will make a test of pleasure; enjoy yourself." But behold, this also was vanity. ² I said of laughter, "It is mad," and of pleasure, "What use is it?" ³ I searched with my mind how to cheer my body with wine—my mind still guiding me with wisdom—and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the sons of men to do under heaven during the few days of their life. ⁴ I made great works; I built houses and planted vineyards for myself; ⁵ I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. ⁶ I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees. ⁷ I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house; I had also great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem. ⁸ I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the treasure of kings and provinces; I got singers, both men and women, and many concubines, man's delight.

Here is Pompeii writ large. Here is the rich man beyond all imagining. He comes to realize that to live this way is a fool's paradise. For to place our trust in wealth says this most wealthy of men is vanity of folly because:

sometimes one who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by another who did not toil for it. This also is vanity and a great evil. ²² What do mortals get from all the toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? ²³ For all their days are full of pain, and their work is a vexation; even at night their minds do not rest.¹

¹ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition.* (1993). (Ec 2:21–23). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

Rather we are to be rich towards God. To truly live life is to invest in others. To live one's life with purpose is to use the money we have in ways that make a difference in the lives of others. It is to realize that our eternal souls are shaped and formed in a particular way by how we relate to wealth, status and our place on the social ladder.

The world has always said these are the values that most matter. Jesus says that no they do not because of what Moses says to us in our appointed Psalm. Here our lives are seen from the perspective of God. In the sight of God a thousand years are like a day and our life is in comparison like one day. Our lives, say Moses, are like the grass that flourishes in the morning but by evening it fades and withers.

So we pray:

**Teach us to count our days,
That we may gain a wise heart.**

Dear friends today Jesus speaks with a passion and conviction about what matters and asks us to wisely answer the question:

will it be, your money or your life?

Don't settle for the motto of Pompeii: *"enjoy life while you have it for tomorrow is uncertain"*. Don't settle for the motto of the rich fool **"Eat, drink and be merry"**. Rather take to heart the only motto that in the end matters. *"Life in short and uncertain while the eternal accounting of our soul is certain, so invest in God"*