

Homily for September 27, 2018

Feast of St Vincent de Paul

We read in today's Gospel that King Herod was perplexed. One version intensifies Herod's state by saying 'he was thoroughly perplexed' because he heard John the Baptist, whom he had beheaded, had risen from the dead. In other words, Herod was greatly confused about what was happening with Jesus, wanting to now see Him in person.

Perplexity is a state that can grip many people today. Living through the ups and downs of daily life we try to make sense of it. I want to suggest to you today that we will always be perplexed by life unless we do see Jesus.

Let me explain what I mean by reference first to the reading from Ecclesiastes. In it we read:

*Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher,
vanity of vanities! All is vanity.*

So who is the teacher? It is King Solomon who later in this same book tells us something about his own life. Listen to how he puts it in chapter 2:

*Oh, I did great things:
built houses,
planted vineyards,
designed gardens and parks
and planted a variety of fruit trees in them,
made pools of water
to irrigate the groves of trees.
I gathered a chorus of singers to entertain me with song,
and—most exquisite of all pleasures—
voluptuous maidens for my bed.¹*

Did you know there was this kind of stuff in the Bible? Wow what a life Solomon. With this in mind let's return to our verse. This teacher, who experienced everything winning the lotto can ever promise us, says four times in one verse, vanity – and to make sure we get his point:

“ALL IS VANITY”.

What does he mean by this? It's not what you probably think. In English the word vanity is associated with disordered love, or over attention to one's appearance. The Hebrew word translated as "vanity" is the word "HEBEL" which literally means a vapour or a breath. HEBEL sounds kind of like another word – Adam and Eve's first born son "Abel" whose life was fleeting, like a vapor because it was taken by Cain.

This is what Solomon, the teacher discovered. If we try to make sense out of life just by living with nothing but the material world in mind, we will be perplexed. It is only as we see Jesus, the

¹ Peterson, E. H. (2005). [*The Message: the Bible in contemporary language*](#) (Ec 2:4–8). Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress.

one who entered into this material world that we can discover life's true meaning. Where is that meaning found?

Listen to the answer from today's Psalm 90:12

*So teach us to count our days
that we may gain a wise heart.²*

How do we gain a wise heart"? It is by listening to the words of the teacher Ecclesiastes. After detailing for 12 chapters how life is so fleeting – like a vapor- listen to how he concludes this book.

¹³ The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone.³

To fear God means to put Jesus first in our lives something we see embodied in the lives of the saints. Saints, like St. Vincent de Paul, who lived in 16th and 17th century, invested in those values that are not fleeting but have eternal dividends. His particular way of seeing Jesus was through the poor. He understood that the only way to gain a wise heart was by taking to heart verses like this one from Proverbs 19:17:

*Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the LORD,
and will be repaid in full.⁴*

Rather than amassing wealth for oneself, what Solomon did, and he concluded all is vanity, St. Vincent de Paul used wealth generously was in turn lending to God because in the poor he saw Jesus. Listen to his words:

Even though the poor are often rough and unrefined, we must not judge them from external appearances nor from the mental gifts they seem to have received. On the contrary, if you consider the poor in the light of faith, then you will observe that they are taking the place of the Son of God who chose to be poor.

St Vincent de Paul amidst life's perplexity had clarity of vision because he saw Jesus in the poor so as to understand that in the ephemerality of life termed "vanity of vanities" was not his life moto. He lived with purpose because in kindness to the poor he was making a loan to God, who is always good to his promise to repay in full.

² [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#). (1993). (Ps 90:12). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

³ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#). (1993). (Ec 12:13). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

⁴ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#). (1993). (Pr 19:17). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.