

18th Sunday Ord. Time (C)
St. Athanasius and St. Francis Parishes
July 30, 31, 2016

What would often happen in my family a few weeks prior to Christmas was that my mom would tell me to get something that I wanted and that she and my dad would then pay for it. Well, I have here one of those gifts: Preaching the Lectionary by Reginald H. Fuller, an Anglican priest and Scripture scholar. This was the Christmas gift in 1984. I have used it often and still do.

Looking at it for this weekend's preaching, I read something that I don't ever remember noticing before this time. About today's First Scripture, the first lines of which I am sure you have heard before ... "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity" ... Fuller quotes another Anglican priest and scholar as saying: "Ecclesiastes is the most Christian book in the Old Testament." What he meant with these words, says Fuller, is that Ecclesiastes is a ruthless exposure of what human life is apart from God and, if taken really seriously, prepares the way for a hearing of the gospel of Christ. Ecclesiastes is not so much good news as it is the bad news that has to be heard before the good news becomes audible. "Vanity of vanities" ... all of human life is ultimately futile and meaningless if viewed in itself, apart from God.

Ecclesiastes teaches what life is like without God...."vanity of vanities"

Ecclesiastes teaches that I cannot hear Good News until I first confront the bad news that abounds. (12-step programs no one can find the good news of AA until they face the fact that for them alcohol/drugs is bad news and a problem.)

Ecclesiastes is clear that recognizing the darkness is the only way to open ourselves to the Light that without God 'all indeed is vanity'.

This is what Jesus Himself did. Jesus faced his Paschal Mystery ... that resurrection and new life would only come through and after his suffering and death. The reason we have such difficulty hearing the Good News of Jesus about life in the Kingdom is that we cling only to the ideas and forces of life on earth. Ecclesiastes says that all of human life is ultimately meaningless..... vanity of vanities.

Putting this thinking into contemporary terms, it really doesn't matter

If I win the ball game,
land the available scholarship,
go to the right college,
add on a family room to the house,
have the latest model truck,
get the promotion at work,
get the kitchen remodeled,
it just doesn't matter!

Just within the past week, I have seen two references to the movie "Citizen Kane". It is

an old movie (1941), but a classic. It focuses on the tragic hero, Charles Foster Kane, who pushes himself through marriages and other relationships, accumulates tremendous material wealth only to fail in the end. And through it all he remains a very sad man. Rather appropriate to today's First Scripture and today's Gospel text. "*Vanity of vanities, and all is vanity*".

Looking at today's second Scripture, which again this weekend is from St. Paul's Letter to the Colossians, we hear how we must '*seek what is above*'. It is starkly clear: "*put to death, the parts of you that are earthly.*" "*Remember that your life is hidden with Christ in God.*" With Christ we must die to the things of this world, so that with Christ we can rise with Him to eternal glory. This is the Paschal Mystery, and it is the essential mystery of all Christian faith. If we don't understand this, and if we don't live this in our daily lives, we will never understand Jesus and his life.

Why do I have trouble with the story of the Prodigal Son?

Why do I have trouble with parable of the workers in the vineyard in which those who began their work late in the day get paid the same as those who started at the beginning of the day?

Why do I have trouble with today's parable ... "*You fool, this night your life will be demanded of you; and the things you have prepared, to whom will they belong?*"

Too often today, God is not so much denied as He is simply disregarded. No doubt we all recognize that in life today our real focus is on material concerns. While no one here denies God, and the majority of those not here also don't deny God, yet God just too often gets 'sidelined'; God is certainly not first on our list of priorities.

I see this happen in the life and activity of the Church. Church and parish life necessarily involve material things. We probably need a church building, and we probably need a place in which to learn the ways of God: be that a school, a parish center, or just a couple of rooms somewhere. And, we also need to take care of these material things in a responsible way. Yet Church is not a business, and its mission is not to maintain itself. The Church is a way of life. The Church is how we live the life of Jesus. If I expect my life to go on through death into some kind of eternal life, the only way for that to happen is if I live my life here on earth in union with Jesus. Jesus is the only way through and the only eventual way out of this life. "We are in the world, but not of it." We must store up treasure in the Kingdom, not treasure here on earth. The principles of the Kingdom are those of dying to self, living for God, compassion and mercy rather than vengeance and getting even. Justice toward others, and not merely securing what I think you deserve.

In the words of today's Psalm Response, "*If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.*"