

Commentary on the Gospel for Wed, May 15th 2013

“We must help the weak.”

“It is more blessed to give than to receive.”

“They do not belong to the world any more than I belong to the world.”

Three related but very profound elements in today’s readings that, for me, are at the heart of the message of Jesus. However, living that message in today’s world is another thing. Here are a couple mindsets that might give some perspective:

Why must we “help the weak” – why don’t they get a job and help themselves? Why are they leeches on our system? It’s the old “give a man a fish today” thing. There are too many people looking for do-gooders to bail them out of bad decisions. They chose to drop out of school, or to drink or do drugs, or to rob a convenience store, so why should we have to take care of them now? It is too bad they are sick, but why didn’t they plan ahead and get health insurance? Who says society has a responsibility to take care of these people? I worked hard for what I have. Why should I give it away? What’s mine is mine.

More blessed to give than receive? I’m a citizen, I’m entitled to that benefit. Why shouldn’t the government tax those fat cats and give me this benefit? Those privileged snobs – they just bribe people to get what they want and the little guy like me has no chance. I can’t help it if I can’t keep a job – those bosses always have it in for poor slobs like me. I don’t have that much – I need all I have to live. Why should I give it away? What’s mine is mine.

What does it mean to “belong to the world?” We are “in” this world, and Christ says He is speaking “in” this world, but that he does not “belong” to it? How can someone be “in” but not “belong” to this world?

As I write this reflection it is Berkshire week in Omaha – a self-proclaimed (by Warren Buffett) “Woodstock for capitalists” that glories in the wealth generated by investment in Berkshire Hathaway stock (full disclosure – we have a few shares of the Class B stock in our retirement fund, but don’t attend the annual meeting.) The local newspaper contained some human interest stories related to these thoughts. One told of people who had the opportunity to invest with Buffett in the very early years and, for whatever reason, chose not to do so. Two other articles spoke of the significant charitable gifts made with the accumulated wealth from Berkshire to causes that fund cancer research, the arts, education and many others.

Do we acquire wealth for its own sake, seeking to accumulate the most we can regardless of the cost to us? Is wealth an end in itself, or is it a tool to provide for ourselves, our family, our community, now and in the future? Do we see wealth as something to be hoarded or something to be shared? Remember why Jesus said it is so hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom – if we see wealth as a right, it becomes difficult to let go of it, and if one cannot let go, it will rule our decisions.

Isn't it our belief that this physical world is a transitory state – mostly pleasant, sometimes hurtful, and all too short? Don't we believe that there is a "life" that follows our time "in" this world? If we do, then it is clear that we are "in" this (physical) world now, but we (the real we) are not "of" this world – we don't "belong" to it. If we believed we belonged to this world, that this is all there is, then at our death, all of our existence for eternity ceases, and then it becomes much easier to respond with a selfish instead of selfless attitude to the questions above.

So if we believe we do not "belong" to this world, then we should act as if this world is temporary, and that what we "have" is transitory, and that ALL the possessions, the wealth we have, including life itself, are not "owned" by us but instead are borrowed from the Creator. If we are not of this world, we should be detached from our "possessions" of this world, and treat them as loans from the Creator rather than ours alone. If we only have possessions on loan, then we should use those possessions as the Lendor intends, not as we wish. If we are using these loans as the Lendor desires, then we will help the weak and we will seek to give rather than receive, because by doing so we recognize the divine in each of these fellow souls created by God. If we seek to give rather than receive, to share rather than hoard, then when the time comes for our temporary life in the world to end, it will be easier to let go of our sensory being because we know we will be stepping through the door into the world of which we truly belong.

And so my prayer today is that constant awareness of my borrowed existence can lead to true detachment from and generous sharing of my loaned possessions.

Tom Purcell