

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Aug 4th 2013

PRE-PRAYERING

In our technological-centered world where communicating has been made so easy, there is the constant frustration when dialing results in getting technical voices instead of a person. Voice-mail, phone options exercised by pushing even more and more buttons can still land us in the Impersonal Bin. It is such a joy when a real person says, “Hello, I am actually talking to you.”

Prayer can seem similar to this kind of impersonal relating. We punch our prayer-buttons desiring to hear from, and communicate with God, but..... no answer, not even a busy signal. We do not equate silence with anything except “nobody is home”. Immediacy as a way of life renders us less patient and less trusting in the multimedia system God uses. We have our one ear to the prayer-phone while God is mysterious enough to be speaking through the other open and available ear, through which we are not attentive.

As we listen our way toward our next liturgy, we can consider all the many ways God is praying around us. We might practice patient listening to the real voices of our days and try to find the grace-touches of our hearts through what we really hear. Try patient listening which might involve patient speaking as well. We believe God is calling us; it is God’s very nature to do so, so who is too busy, or impersonal to pick it up?

REFLECTION

Qoheleth seems to be a collective name rather than a single person. This figure is a representation of the community’s voice expressing its wisdom. The book of Ecclesiastes from which our First Reading is taken is from the larger literary form in the Hebrew Scriptures known as Wisdom Literature from which we get also, Proverbs, Song of Songs and other familiar books.

Vanity for the writer is more like mist or smoke rather than the falseness of glamour. The voice of the people is wondering about what life is really all about. The wise and skilled person has to leave eventually all that knowledge has gained that person.

A person labors, frets and sweats and for what? As with mist and smoke, everything vanishes

eventually. Remember, these are words inspired by the communal voices of the human heart which desires solidity, permanence, and security. For all the laboring, holding fast, nothing seems to last. It does sound like the familiar saying, “Don’t sweat the small stuff and everything is the small stuff.” These verses could encourage a selfish passivity, or a negative view of all efforts and relationships. Skillful planning and hard work will eventually create something, but because it is a “some-thing” it will not last.

The Gospel too has words in a similar style. This chapter from which our verses are taken, opens with Jesus’ speaking to his disciples while a large crowd is listening in. Jesus has hard words about their not living the ways of the Pharisees. He tells them not to worry about their futures, that the Holy Spirit will be with them. Right when Jesus is telling them about how they will be mistreated, a voice from the standing-around crowd pipes up with an absolutely self-centered question, opposite to what Jesus is saying. The interrupter wants the Prophet to adjudicate a family situation of inheritance.

Jesus brings the man up short with a few well-aimed words, but takes the opportunity to spin a parable for him, the crowd, the disciples, and for us.

My father, through hard work and skilled abilities, had quite a good amount of money in his advanced years, stocks, and personal possessions. He had grown up during the Great Depression of the '30's. His father, who was a doctor, had died in the Spanish Flu epidemic when my father was four years old. He never forgot his roots and reminded us that we all came from those same needy roots.

One evening when my mother and we six adult siblings were in the living room he began talking of families who had become divided in relationships with each other in the dividing of inheritances. We knew that it was his own mother’s family to which he was referring. After much talk, he stood up and went to the end of the room and said he was now ready to make a video recording to be played after his death. There was no camera of course; he was doing what he loved to do. He was teaching us in a parable about greed and what’s important. I wish now there had been a camera.

We all got quiet as he began. “Thank you all for coming to this inheritance presentation. I want to thank you all for being a loving family and treating me in the way to which I had become accustomed. I want to tell you what I have decided is important and is the most precious thing I can leave you. My dear family, I came into this world without anything, and I left it in the exact same way. Thank you and see you all on the other side.” Actually, he left the family not only this good advice, but many material gifts as well. In his real legal Will, he had it stated, that if any of the money or possessions led to any division within the family, the whole inheritance was to be collected and given to charity.

Well after his performance, we all laughed, applauded and learned again something he wanted us to know and which Jesus is teaching in today's Gospel.

It is not exactly what we possess, but rather what possesses us. We can express our identities by what we drive or the clothes we wear, but they are an expression of and not our true identities. The fellow in today's Gospel says to himself that now he can take his rest. This is his second big mistake. The first is that he conveniently forgot where his harvest came from. Resting for him means that he will not have to plant again, not have to rely on the lands again, and not have to realize his dependence on God. Rich in the things of this world depends upon how we look at them. Everything has God's creative fingerprints on them and when we miss that truth we fingerpress them as what makes us rich. As has been said, "What we ultimately take with us is all that we have shared.

I delight to hear the very young children defiantly announce, and often, the second word they learn, "mine!!!!!" All parents know the first defiant word which initiates their active vocabulary. The "fool" of this parable lived those words and apparently suffered the Consequence.

"You have given us, O Lord, bread from heaven, endowed with all delights, and sweetness in every taste."

Larry Gillick, S.J.