

Commentary on the Gospel for Sat, Nov 8th 2014

As a young Jesuit scholastic, I was inspired to see an old German missionary celebrate Mass in the local language in a village in central India, squatting on the mud floor, surrounded by the unassuming and affectionate village farmers, as the lovely warm sun set on the horizon. After Mass, they served him a meal and he gratefully ate whatever was offered to him, even relishing the extra-spicy chicken while beads of sweat ran down his face! They were thrilled to share the little they had to make the “gora aadmi” (white man) happy for all his service to them.

In the first reading, Paul writes to his friends in Philippi, thanking them for their concern for him and for their gifts of money. It is not that Paul was in need of money; rather, as a missionary, he learned to be self-sufficient, to manage in different circumstances during his travels. Sometimes he had an abundance, at other times he went hungry. Paul labored hard to earn his own sustenance and relied on the providence of God, yet he appreciated the thoughtfulness of the Philippians and accepted their offerings on more than one occasion.

The emphasis in this passage is on the spiritual growth of the Philippians, who were generous for sharing what they had. Paul praised their offering by saying it had a “fragrant aroma,” a sacrifice pleasing to God, and assured them that God would provide for their needs.

To understand the Gospel passage, let us see it in the wider context of Luke’s chapter 16, which speaks of the appropriate use of wealth. Wealth in itself is neither good nor evil; however, the attachment to wealth is a different matter. The Gospel passage preceding today’s verses is about Jesus’ parable of the dishonest steward, who made friends quickly by decreasing the amounts of those who were indebted to his master. For some, wealth is a blessing, and they use it wisely, as did the Good Samaritan who helped a stranger on the road, or as Zacchaeus did when he shared half his wealth with the poor. For others, wealth is a burden, as we see later in Luke 16: 19 ff., where the rich man is unmindful of the existence of the beggar Lazarus who begs at his gates.

When Jesus mentions “dishonest wealth,” he warns against putting one’s trust in wealth, and making it an end in one’s life. There is a tendency for wealth to lead one to become dishonest. Hence, Jesus clearly urges his disciples to choose: you can either serve God or be a slave to riches. Luke portrays the Pharisees in this passage as those who find it difficult to give their hearts to God since they love wealth (even what they think is their spiritual wealth.)

Let us pray today for a discerning heart: to love God by loving our brothers and sisters, to use wealth

without being attached to it, and to share what we have with the less fortunate.

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