

Homily - Sunday 28th Year B – The Risk of Riches

Do you know the best way to catch a monkey?

In Africa and the Far East people who live on the edge of the forest have been using the same method for centuries. They take a large coconut, open a hole at one end just big enough to allow a monkey's hand to slip inside, hollow it out, and put some roasted peanuts inside. The coconut is attached to a strong length of fibre string and tied to a tree trunk. Then the trapper hides behind bushes with a net...

...The monkey smells the peanuts and is attracted to them. He puts his hand through the hole and grabs a handful. But the hole is not big enough for him to remove his hand when he makes a fist. If he unwilling to let go of the peanuts he is trapped and the hunter can cast his net to capture him.

Peanuts of a different kind can attract and entrap human beings. Today's Gospel presents a wealthy young man who wants to experience the Kingdom of God, life to the full - but he will not relinquish the peanuts of riches. Jesus says quite clearly that it is very difficult for those who have riches to enter the Kingdom of God. His disciples are amazed to hear him say this: their mentality was that prosperity is something to aspire to, and that it is a sign of God's favour. This is an attitude that is still around today.

No one has ever seen reality as clearly as Jesus. He noted dangers and risks associated with prosperity and wealth. What would they be?

First, it seems that material possessions tend to fix a person's heart to this world. If someone has a large stake in this world, so great an interest in the things of this world, it is difficult for that person to think beyond it, and especially difficult for them to contemplate leaving it.

Dr Johnson was once shown round a famous castle with its rich interior and lovely grounds. After he had seen it all he turned to his friends and said: 'These are the things that make it difficult to die'.

So one danger of possessions is, that they fix a person's thoughts and interests to the here and now. As Simon and Garfunkel used to sing: 'A man gets tied up to the ground; he gives the world its saddest sound'.

Second, if a person's main interest is in material possessions it tends to make them think in terms of what money can get and what money can buy. They begin to think of everything in terms of price, and not in terms of value.

It is fatal for a person to begin to think that everything worth having has a money price. They can too easily forget that there are values in this world far beyond money; that there are things that have no price; and that there are precious things which money cannot buy. ‘Can’t buy me love, yeah, money can’t buy me love’ sang The Beatles in their heyday, and they were rich enough to know.

Jesus did not disparage wealth, or castigate the wealthy. He had many friends among the rich of his day, as he did among the poor. But Jesus did warn of the dangers that follow from having an abundance of material goods. Jesus knew the contemporary proverb (also cited by St Paul) that says: ‘The *love* of money is the root of all evil’ (1 Tim 6:10). He would certainly have said that the possession of material things is two things:

In the first place it is an **acid test of a person’s character**. It is said that ‘for a hundred men who can stand adversity, only one can stand prosperity’. Prosperity can all too easily make a person arrogant, self-satisfied, and condescending and dismissive towards others. It takes a really good man, a strong and brave and large-hearted man, to be worthy of prosperity, to be able to cope well with it, to remain a nice person.

Secondly, possessing material wealth is a **responsibility**. A person will always be judged by two standards – how he got his possessions, and how he uses them. Will he use what he has selfishly, or generously? Will he use his wealth as if he had undisputed possession of it, or will he use it remembering that he holds it in stewardship from God?

Jesus wants us all to think about these things, he wants us all to have His values.

Another reaction of the disciples to Jesus’ challenging words was that, if what he was saying was true, to be saved at all was well nigh impossible. Then Jesus stated the whole doctrine of salvation in a nutshell. He said: If our salvation (i.e. our personal welfare in the long term) depended on our own efforts then it would indeed be impossible. But our salvation is the gift of God, to whom everything is possible.

Think again of the monkey and the peanuts in the coconut. The person who puts his trust in himself and in his possessions is putting his whole future at risk. As Jesus said on another occasion: ‘*What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and suffer the loss of his own soul?*’

It is only the person who puts their trust in the saving and redeeming power of God who will enter freely and safely into the fullness of life.