

6th Sunday in Ordinary Time cycle C

For most people, a catalogue is nothing more than just that: a catalogue; a handy, useful consumer reference guide that lets us know what's out there, and what it costs. It allows us to compare and contrast products, styles, sizes, usefulness, and prices, and all without what is for some of us the horrors of having to go into a store and shop. But for others, it's more than just a catalogue: it's a field of dreams. Within the pages are all sorts of things which may be had, with these images we can start to dream of nicer and fancier homes, of newer and shinier gadgets, of bigger and more productive machines and appliances. For still others, it's more than a catalogue of products, and even more than a field of dreams: it's more like a Venus Fly Trap. It's the summary of all the latest, newest, fanciest, classiest, most novel new things which we simply must have in order to be happy. For a few people, consumerism sums up their lives, and these pages sum up their consumerism: happiness predicated not on who we are, but on what we have.

Being a consumer of products isn't evil; owning things isn't evil; enjoying the various goods of this world isn't evil. But there is a progression which occurs with our possessions, and as Christians who do value the spiritual more than the material, we should be cognizant of that progression. It begins with our enjoyment of things, and enjoyment and pleasure are not bad things, and in fact, can be good for us. After all, God created the world for man to partake of, and for man to enjoy. He wants us to derive some pleasure out of the things he created, and out of the relationships which make us uniquely human. But after enjoyment comes desire and desire can be dangerous. I don't want to say that it's always and everywhere bad, because I think that emotionally we desire many things without predicating our happiness on them. I have possessions which I would surely miss if I were to lose them today, but I wouldn't say that I would never be happy again without them. But desire can be dangerous, because if we're not careful it can lead to attachment. Attachment, carried to an extreme, can lead to a sort of conviction. Conviction happens when I become convinced that I must have these things in order to be happy. It's undue enjoyment, and unhealthy attachment. It's dangerous because it can directly impact our relationship with God; it creates in man an attitude that God must provide me with this thing that I love in heaven, in order for it to be heaven for me. But heaven is not what we would make it; it is what it is, a share in God's own life; and when we start to place demands on God as to how it ought to be there, we run the risk of implicitly rejecting it, in essence asking for a lesser place of our own to design to spend eternity. Hell is the realm of the unique misery of one who asked for something other than heaven in which to spend eternity, and one of the greatest pain there is regret: regret that despite being told to long for heaven, being told to ask for heaven, being warned to strive for heaven, one insisted on something that more resembled their wants and desires here. And then, those same wants and desires become regrets, and their pleasures turn into pains.

It is no wonder that Luke warns us, then, about the trappings of wealth. In the Sermon on the Plains, Luke presents us with the blessings and the woes: the rich versus the poor, the satisfied versus the hungry, those who laugh versus those who weep. It is not a blanket condemnation of those who have possessions and adequate food and essentially a good life, any more than it is a blanket pass for those who have not those things to enter the kingdom of heaven without seeking it. But it is a warning about becoming too satisfied here. For Luke, those who are satisfied here—the wealthy, the well-fed, the happy—are those who may not commit to the kingdom because what they have here is satisfying enough. For the poor, it's easy to long for heaven, to long for something more than what this world and this life has to offer: anything has to be better than starving, or freezing; the promise of eternal life joined to eternal happiness far surpasses what they experience here. But for those who really, really love what they have here, heaven may actually be sort of feared: what if the car or the house or the “whatever” that I owned, that brought me more happiness and joy than anything and anyone on earth, isn't part of heaven? What if all the gadgets and appliances that I just can't live without here are not to be a part of God's plan for eternity? What if the things that make me happy simply aren't part of God's eternal life? Could I then even be happy there? Is this a place I can actually long for? And most dangerous of all: what if, for the entirety of my life here, I never cultivate a longing for God himself, but only for things? What if I spent my time here disbelieving his existence, or being angry at him because of my bad breaks in life, or simply being indifferent to him because worshipping him wasn't as much fun as playing with all my toys? Almost everyone believes they are going to heaven; polls show that. But how many believe that they are going to the place which God has designed, and how many think themselves to be going to a heaven of their own design? One doesn't have to be materially wealthy to fall under this curse: to long for a place which is really just an extended and improved version of the life they have, rather than the possession of things which eye has not seen, and ear has not heard?

Jeremiah draws very well this contrast between the true “haves” and “have nots”: There are those who place their trust in human beings, including themselves, and those who place their trust in God; those who seek their strength in the flesh, versus those who seek spiritual strength; those who turn towards God, and those who turn away from him towards all sorts of earthly goods; those who have faith and those who have it not. One takes the way of the world; the other seeks the way of the cross. And Jesus tells us that his way, the way of the cross, is the only way to find lasting satisfaction; and so the Church he left us encourages, as a means to spiritual growth, vows of poverty; and if not taking a vow to not own anything, to cultivate a spirit of poverty; to settle for less than what we could actually have, so as not to become too attached and yes, *convinced* that we need these things to be happy. The Church does not seek, but does embrace the cross of illness and pain, and sees them as the means to purification and grace. Even as the body grows weaker, the spirit may grow stronger, and in fact, this should be the hope of every Christian, that

while the demise and decay of the body is inevitable, the spirit may grow stronger, even up until the point of death.

It would be easy, too easy, to take Jesus' discourse and interpret it as "poor—good, rich—bad." But Jesus sets before us the more nuanced, and difficult task, of just ordering the world rightly. And so, our goal as Christians should be to enjoy what God has given us here, but to use what we have only in ways which are pleasing to the Giver. We should receive his gifts with thanksgiving, but always recognize them as gifts, and not entitlements. We should see in everything good a sign of God's goodness and love; and then set our hearts not on love of things, but on love of him; and to love others, but to love the One who created them still more. We do not seek illness, but will use it as a means to grace and salvation. We don't have to automatically renounce wealth, but we must answer God's call to generosity. Above all, if we embrace Jesus' sermon on the plains, we must never place conditions or restrictions on what heaven will be like. Woe to those who think that this life is as good as it gets, and who then seek nothing more; blessed are they who will relinquish some of their time and treasure here, and invest it in the pursuit of life everlasting.

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