

Wisdom of Heart

By Grattan Brown

August 4, 2019 – Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Readings: Ecclesiastes 1.2, 2.21-23; Colossians 3.1-5, 9-11; Luke 12.13-21

The readings for this Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time take us through a wide range of ideas, emotions, attitudes, virtues, and vices that we experience in our ordinary life and work. There is the excitement of becoming wealthy and the frustration of seeing wealth squandered, kindness and greed, joy and anxiety, God turning us back to dust and raising us from the dead, an exhortation to seek what is above by struggling with what is earthly. As confusing as these interior movements can be, God uses them to “teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain wisdom of heart” (Ps 90.12).

All Things Are Vanity

Reading “all things are vanity” in the bible is especially perplexing. Didn’t God create all things good? If you mean “all *human activities* are vanity,” that’s overkill. Sometimes we do well, and even when we do not, God may draw good from our failures. How can that be vanity?

In other parts of Ecclesiastes, Qoheleth himself urges: “Enjoy life with the wife whom you love” (9.9); “let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth” (11.9); “eat your bread with enjoyment and drink your wine with a merry heart” (9.7); and God “has made everything beautiful in its time” (3.11). These are not the words of a man in complete despair.

What angst and sorrow does Qoheleth have in mind? In the verses of today’s reading, Qoheleth laments the wise man who sees his wealth fall into the hands of a fool and who had already felt the fear of failure that accompanied his work all along. The moments when we work with “wisdom and knowledge and skill” are wonderfully free from “anxiety of heart” and “sorrow and grief” (2.21). They do not feel like toil at all. But failures and vulnerabilities along the way can color our very outlook on life and work, making losses look like “vanity,” and sometimes for good reason. Laboring for anything less than love for God will regularly expose our overweening love of creatures, especially the creatures of our own making.

This is one kind of vanity that Qoheleth places before us. The supposedly wise laborer sees vanity when his wealth falls to “another who has not labored over it.” But we might object: “Why is it not enough to have wisdom and knowledge and skill with some wealth to show for it? Why care what the next generation does with its inheritance? Be happy that your work has made you wise, knowledgeable, and skillful.” A Jew who has lived and worked well, gained wisdom through success and failure, and charitably left a legacy is surely righteous before God. The same kind of life sets the Christian or other person of good will on a path toward loving, eternal union with God. That is one objection, at least.

What Does Matter

Nonetheless, we can see another kind of vanity by admitting that it *does* matter what a generation does with its inheritance. Qoheleth's audience was certainly concerned and devoted great effort, including Qoheleth's writing itself, to passing on the wisdom necessary to preserve what inheritance it had. Qoheleth's audience lived after the Babylonian Exile, when the Jews definitively lost the land, society, and righteous monarchical leadership promised in the covenant tradition. They hoped that their fidelity to the covenant and the wisdom of living it rightly would prompt Yahweh to restore that covenant.

Several centuries later, during Jesus' time, some Jews were still hoping for this inheritance. In the gospel reading today, a Jew urges Jesus to tell his brother to share the family's inheritance. The very request is damning because brothers should cooperate to steward their family's wealth. With charity, calling the man "friend," Jesus points out the only real solution: the man and his brother together must exercise wise judgment. After all, they know their circumstances better than any judge.

Serious conflict within a family is a disaster for the family, but when serious conflict reproduces itself across many families, it becomes a disaster for the entire people. The prophet Isaiah excoriated the wealthy Jews of his time for defrauding their poorer brothers of their covenant inheritance, as the Northern Kingdom fell to the Assyrians (Is 10.1-4). Similarly, Jesus turns to the crowd, which hopefully included the man's brother, in order to speak about the brothers' most likely fault: greed.

Jesus' parable demonstrates the folly, or vanity, of greed. A bountiful harvest surprises the rich man, who now has a good problem to solve, namely, what to do with unexpected wealth. His first decision is a wise one: build a bigger barn. But we soon find that he's counting on that bigger barn to guarantee the freedom to "rest, eat, drink, [and] be merry" (Lk 12.19).

A wise person recognizes that wealth not only guarantees little but also eventually belongs to others, leaving the wealthy wise man with nothing but the wisdom and charity acquired along the way and a legacy of how to use it well. Wealth affords no rest from the work of spiritual growth, but in fact makes that work more difficult.

The rich fool's unexpected wealth changed him for the worse. He would have benefited from Paul's exhortation to "seek what is above" by "put[ting] to death . . . the parts . . . that are earthly" (Col 3.2, 5). The rich fool is reminded of his death to show him that he will be forced to give up his wealth.

Paul exhorts his fellow Christians to give up voluntarily whatever vices they have, including greed, so that they might become wise. Have we any better work?

Dr. Grattan Brown is academic dean of [Thales College](#), a new liberal arts college in Raleigh, NC.

For Further Reading

- Deacon Frederick Bartels, "[*The Parable of the Rich Man*](#)"
- [*Catechism of the Catholic Church, ##2534-2557*](#)
- Francis, "[*Money Helps, Covetousness Kills*](#)"
- Peter Kreeft, "[*Three Ways of Living*](#)"
- Rev. Robert J. Wagner, "[*Lessons from a Fool*](#)"

In Short . . .

- *Our failures and vulnerabilities can color our outlook on life and work, making losses look like "vanity," and sometimes for good reason.*
- *Laboring for anything less than love for God will regularly expose our overweening love of creatures, especially the creatures of our own making.*
- *A wise person recognizes that wealth not only guarantees little but also eventually belongs to others.*
- *Wealth affords no rest from the work of spiritual growth but in fact makes that work more difficult.*
- *Jesus' parable demonstrates the folly, or vanity, of greed: The rich fool is reminded of his death to show him that he will be forced to give up his wealth.*