

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C
Ecclesiastes 1:2, 2:21-23
Ps 90 *passim*
Col 3:1-5, 9-11
Lk 12:13-21

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In ancient Rome the Senate used to confer a special honor on victorious generals. To celebrate an especially great victory, they would conduct a so-called "triumph." It was like a mega-parade. The legions who had served under the general's command all marched in step. The general would get to show off the prisoners his troops had taken in battle, and the plunder they had looted from the enemy. Sometimes a special arch was constructed under which the entire parade passed. And heading up the parade was the general himself, standing tall and proud in his chariot holding the reins of the horses. The general wore a wreath made up of laurel leaves woven into a crown. He stood alone in the chariot, but he was not alone. Crouching behind him was a slave, a young boy with a big bag of flax. (Think of flax as something like dried corn-silk.) The boy's job was to keep taking handfuls of the flax and to set them on fire while uttering the words "*Sic transit gloria mundi.*" Thus passes the glory of the world.

Here today, gone tomorrow. Everything in this world passes away. Everything. In *this* world. That's what today's readings are about. The Gospel, the letter of St. Paul to the Church at Colossae, even the Psalm. The psalmist points out that grass springs up at dawn but wilts and fades away by evening. And of course, we started with that strange passage from the Book of Ecclesiastes.

If you suffer from depression, or if someone close to you does, you might take comfort in the Book of Ecclesiastes. If you read it, you'll see that the narrator, who is called Qoheleth, which means Preacher, . . . you see that the narrator obviously suffers from depression. His whole outlook is gloomy. But for thousands of years it has had its rightful place among the books of Holy Scripture.

Vanity of vanities, and all is vanity, Qoheleth cries. "Vain" is one of those slippery words in the English language. Years ago Carly Simon sang a pop song called "You're So Vain." The first line went: "You're so vain, you prob'ly think this song is about you." There vain refers to someone who is excessively concerned with his or her appearance. But there's another, very different meaning as well, as when we say, "He tried to do such-and-such, but all his efforts were in vain."

It's to this second meaning that Qoheleth refers. Whatever we're trying to achieve, on a natural human level, it's going to fall short of our goal. We want life, liberty, and the

pursuit of happiness, and those are worthy goals that all please God, but none of them is permanent. Everything passes away. Sic transit gloria mundi. Whoosh!

In the Gospel, Jesus tells a story about a rich man who rejoices over a bumper crop. Jesus is not criticizing the man for being rich; he doesn't say that the man is wicked; no, he says that the man is *foolish*. He's foolish because his great big new barns will be of no use to him once he's dead, and death comes at any time.

Three weeks ago Jesus reminded us of the two keys to holiness: one, love God with every fiber of your being; two, love your neighbor not as an other but as another self. Then two weeks ago we saw him in the home of Martha and Mary. Martha all wrapped up in the hassle of cooking dinner, and resenting her sister sitting at the feet of Jesus. Jesus told Martha to stop fretting over all the stuff that made her anxious and to understand that as between getting stuff done and keeping your eyes fixed on Jesus, there's no contest. (The best thing of all is to get your stuff done while still being a good Christian.)

Just as he did last Sunday, Jesus is telling us to trust in the tender mercies of our loving God. Last week he taught the Apostles, "Ask and you will receive, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened unto you." And he taught them to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread." Give us day by day just what we need to get us through the day.

But we want more. We want security. We want to secure our futures. We want to be self-reliant, beholden to nobody. And Jesus tells us today that on this side of the grave, there is no security. Silver tarnishes. Grain rots. Stock markets crash. Bubbles burst. The only genuine security is in the sheltering arms of God our Father.

Jesus wants us to be engaged in the world, to care about our own welfare and the welfare of others. He does not want us to be all wrapped up in earthly pursuits. He wants us to remember, always, that in the end we're not going to be judged by the possessions we've amassed, or the fame we've achieved, or the honors we've received. We will be judged by how good and faithful a follower of Jesus we have been over the course of our brief lifetimes.

Whoosh! Sic transit gloria mundi.