

The Rich Fool

Fr. Vince Donovan was a missionary priest who worked among the Masai people in Tanzania.

The Masai are nomads, so Fr. Vince joins them in their travels and shares with them his understanding of the Christian God.

The Masai also believe in one god, but it is their god, a tribal god.

A god who loves the Masai; not outsiders.

Something like the tribal god that so many in America worship, a god who loves America best, who blesses our wars, who looks the other way at our excesses....

Just so, the Masai god supports the Masai in their cattle raids on neighboring clans and tribes, and curses those who are not Masai.

So Fr. Vince starts talking with them about the Christian God who is revealed to us through Jesus, the one true God who loves all people, even the other clans, even the other tribes, and after many days of talking about such things, Fr. Vince watches the old tribal leader and his community struggle with this new way of understanding God, with one man, named Keriko, holding his head in absolute pain.

Fr. Vince asks about this poor man holding his head, but the man he asks just laughs... and explains that, "for a Masai, there is not much need to think in life.

Almost everything he knows, about food and clothes and houses and cattle he learned long ago, and memorized it, so that thinking is to him like tying your shoes or buttoning your shirt is to you... meaning ... he can reach adulthood without really thinking at all.

What you, Father, are asking this man to do is to take this thought about the Masai as God's favored people and this new thought that God loves every person in the world, and to put these two thoughts together and make a new thought.

The pain in this man's face is there because he is really thinking for the first time in his life." Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered*, 39-40 (paraphrased).

We can chuckle at our poor Masai friend, but truth be told, if we take today's gospel lesson seriously, we will probably join him with a sore head!

For we who have been born and raised in this land of incredible wealth, today's gospel lesson is a tough one.

We baby boomers especially, and our children who follow, become consumers almost before we can walk or talk.

My cousin's first words weren't "mommy" or "daddy" but "coca cola!"

So what happens to us, we who live and breathe a culture that rewards financial success, that measures a human being by the size of his bank account or paycheck or house, what happens to us who rarely give a second thought to our national motto: "cash is king!" --- when we come face to face with this God who puts his finger to our nose and says our best thinking is not only foolish but life-ending?

Here in Hawaii we still have, thanks to our Hawaiian and Asian traditions, strong family and community ties.

Yet this great gift of community is constantly bombarded by the broader culture that champions the rich, the handsome, the strong.

We see it in multimillion dollar condos going up like weeds in Kakaako while thousands of our local people are barely holding on, or are in the street already....., in the obscenity of corporate bigwigs earning not 20 times but 200 times the average worker.

We see it in a presidential candidate who seems to delight in attacking minorities of all kinds with racist, hateful, stereotyping.

It is this loss of community that Jesus is getting at in the parable of the rich fool.

Here is the rich man, speaking only to himself, planning only with himself, seeking to benefit only himself.

He is like so many of us: independent, self-reliant, needing no one.

Except, the man lives in an illusion.

This is not how God intends us to be!

So that in the end, only God can break through his delusions, thundering, "look what you have done to yourself! You plan alone, build alone, indulge alone, and now..... you will die alone!" Bailey, Through Peasant Eyes, 67.

Many preachers do their best to take the bite out of this parable.

They say: "The problem isn't wealth, it's is how we use it."

That sounds good, but it's not Jesus.

St. Paul understands Jesus perhaps better than any other human being.

And this is what St. Paul says about the source of most folks wealth, which is work.

He says we work for just two reasons:

First, so we aren't a burden on others, and second, so we can have resources to give to those in need.

How different from our culture, which teaches us to work in order to accumulate wealth, so that I can retire to the good life, to eat, drink and be merry!

That same thinking is the source of our love affair with Vegas and Powerball lotteries, that hope of making it big so I can finally sit back and relax?

The musings of the foolish rich man are the musings of our culture.

Which is why we have the old saying, the truth will set you free, but first it will make you miserable!

And yet, none of this should be heard as a scold or as judgment.

Rather, look at what Jesus does in today's gospel.

He tells that young man who wants "justice" from his brother that when you chase after that kind of justice, you only get hurt, you only get a war, and by the way, how much money is worth a ruined relationship between brothers?

It's what St. Augustine means when he says "that God gave us people to love and things to use, and sin is the confusion of these two."

Today's gospel is a reminder, especially to we rich of this world, that all we have is gift, that our lives and all material blessings are on loan to us, we don't own any of it, we've only borrowed it.

That is the cold water Jesus throws on that young man disputing his inheritance, not to be mean, but to wake him up.

It is the cold water we need because if St Paul is right about the true reason for work, then I need to reassess my tightwad self, my self-righteous self that looks down on those in need, my tight-fisted self that always worries about tomorrow..... giving me just as big a headache as that Masai man.

But like much of our faith, what seems at first to be only bad news, is in fact, the very best of news.

How often do we think of Christianity as nothing more than a set of rules, whose sole goal is after we die, to strum a harp on a fluffy cloud?

But that is not the faith that God, through Jesus, calls us to.

When God becomes a human being in Jesus, heaven and earth are joined together, and through the gift of the Holy Spirit, the kingdom of God is even now invading the earth, in your life and mine.

There is no longer the sacred and the profane, the holy and the secular: all that is lives in God, including you and me and all of our brothers and sisters, especially those in need, especially the outcast, the vulnerable, the weird.

The world is an abundant place.

The Creator knows our needs.

And he beckons us today to unclench our hands, to let loose our wallets, to give up control, and in the letting go, to learn how to live.

Jesus says elsewhere, don't fear those who can kill you, fear him who can throw you into hell.

Yet the good news of Jesus is that the only one we truly should fear is he who loves us, and loves us enough so that it is safe to unclench, safe to exhale, safe to live one day at a time, safe to give, safe to open our eyes to all that we have, and accept it all as a gift, a loan, freely given so that we may, in turn, freely give.

May God bless you, and give you peace,

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