

**Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year C
(Aug. 1, 2004)**

Vanity of Vanities

A year or so ago John Grisham, that rather prolific lawyer turned novelist, published a book called *The King of Torts*. Since his books are so popular I would wager that a good number of you have read it. It's about a young lawyer who begins his career as a public defender. He's honest and idealistic and does the best he can in the often difficult and unappreciated job that he has. Suddenly he is presented with the opportunity of making a great deal of money. While the circumstances under which this windfall comes are somewhat mysterious he can see no good reason to refuse it. Then after an initial spectacular success more opportunities come his way, and he suddenly finds himself a very wealthy man and traveling in some very high-powered circles. As time goes on and he acquires more and more wealth and prestige, his whole life begins to be focused on his money and possessions and the need to amass still more and more. Well, of course, the reader knows from the start that this is all going to end in disaster, and from our perspective here today, it seems as though the novel is a kind of modern morality tale that illustrates both what we heard in our first reading and the lesson Jesus is teaching in the Gospel.

Vanity of vanities, says Quotheth, in the first reading, all is vanity. Jesus warns against greed and says that those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich in what matters to God will end up like the man in the parable

Now, one thing to understand. Nowhere in the Gospels does Jesus condemn riches as such. In itself wealth is neither good nor bad. It's the use of it that determines its moral status. Indeed Jesus appears to have had wealthy friends, whose company he enjoyed. And he did not always make the same demands on people concerning wealth and material possession. He apparently adapted himself to different people and different circumstances.

For instance, the rich man who comes to him and asks what must he do to gain eternal life: Jesus tells him to keep the commandments and then

if he wants to be perfect to sell everything he has and give all his money to the poor. But when Zacchaeus tells him he gives half his money to the poor Jesus does not ask anything more of him. His dear friends, Martha, Mary, and Lazarus seem to have been comfortably well off but he makes no demands on them whatsoever. In all of this he looks to the individual and his or her needs and acts accordingly.

But at the same time he knows the dangers that we risk when we become too much concerned with money and material things. Money can create division. In the Gospel passage you just heard the man who asks him to intercede with his brother on his behalf is obviously at odds with his brother because of money. That's why Jesus refuses to arbitrate between them and tells the crowd. "Take care to guard against all greed, for though one may be rich one's life does not consist of possessions." Greed causes division. It destroys relationships and community and for that reason it is sinful.

Now we know that the better part of our waking hours is spent in making a living, providing necessary material things for ourselves and our families. And obviously there is nothing wrong with that. What Quothelth calls vanity and what Jesus condemns is an obsession with money, the kind that in fact destroys the young lawyer in John Grisham's book. Quothelth and Jesus are both urging perspective, a perspective that allows us to control our possessions and not let them control us.

On this day after the Feast of St. Ignatius I cannot help but think of a fundamental principle that comes from Ignatius's Spiritual Exercises. Before he even allows the retreatant to get down to the nitty-gritty of the Exercises, Ignatius asks him or her to pray for indifference to all created things so as not to be inclined more to riches than to poverty, to long life than to a short one, to honor rather than dishonor, but to keep ourselves in a balance or in a state of equilibrium before these things and to be open to whatever it is that God has in store for us. I like to use the word freedom, rather than indifference. We are to pray to be free of inordinate attachments so that our choices in life may be governed by what we perceive to be for the greater glory of God, a favorite saying of Ignatius.

Nonetheless in both the Old and New Testaments there is a certain predilection for the poor, what today we have come to call a "preferential

option for the poor.” Jesus seems to have a special love for them because they know how much they depend on God. They don’t have great riches or material things to rely on so they have to rely on others. From a Biblical perspective that primarily means God.

We all, rich or poor or somewhere in between, can make our own the wealth of the Psalms, but it must be a special consolation to the poor to be able to say, “In God alone be at rest, my soul; he alone is my rock, my stronghold.” Anybody whose security is in the size of a bank account cannot honestly pray these words. Or the well-known words of Psalm 23: “The Lord is my shepherd there is nothing I shall want.” How often have we heard those words and reflected seriously on what they meant? They are a prayer of unconditional trust in God.

St. Augustine famously said, “Our hearts were made for you, O Lord, and they are restless until they rest in you.” Nothing else can really satisfy us, not all the riches, honors, prestige, and power in the world.

In addition St. Paul reminds us in today’s second reading that immersion in the things of this world can easily tempt us to greed and immorality. And that means we run the risk of losing everything like the man in the Gospel parable. We want to be good providers and take care of the concerns God has entrusted to us. Indeed we must. We have to work diligently. But let’s keep the horizon before our eyes. And when the day comes to move on to our heavenly home, we shall have done well but not lost our freedom – or our real inheritance.