Homily for the 18th Sunday(8/4/2019)

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Jamie asked God, “How long is a million years to you?” God said, “It is but a second, Jamie.” Jamie asked, “God, how much is a million dollars to you?” God said to Jamie, “It is but a penny to me.” Then, Jamie asked, “God, can I have a penny?” God replied, “One second, Jamie.”

“Money or life!” That could sum up the message of today’s Gospel and readings. I heard a famous Jack Benny story who was a comedian long time ago. His stage image was a miser. In one radio skit, he was approached by a robber who said, “Your money or your life!”

After a long pause, the thief repeated, “Your money or your life!” Finally, Jack Benny replied, “I am thinking, I am thinking.” It produced the longest audience laugh time in radio history. “Your money or your life!” “I am thinking.” How about you?

Today’s readings make us think about disasters which can strike any of us at any time. In the first reading, the prophet Qoheleth tells us life is unfair. We work, we sweat, and then, in a puff, all is gone. “Vanity of vanities! All things are vanity!” The prophet says.

As with mist and smoke, everything vanishes eventually. If there is no life after death, no Heaven, no promise of a better world, then life in this world is empty, hopeless, without meaning or purpose. Thank God! We have life after death. We believe so!

So, in the Gospel, Jesus warns against greed and gluttony, reminding us that one’s life does not consist of possessions, but in the spiritual treasures we store up for our souls by doing good and seeking justice. Jesus is calling us to look more deeply at the purpose of our lives.

The man in the Gospel parable got greed. His question is how to store his great harvest. I think we have to be careful not to misunderstand this parable.

The farmer was not a bad person. He was an honest, hardworking man, like all farmers. It is not a mortal sin to build larger barns, and it is not a sin to be rich or successful and to prepare for a comfortable retirement. Then, why did Jesus call Him a fool?

He failed to understand that the bumper crop was a gift from God entrusted to him, and it did not totally and exclusively belong to him alone. God’s generosity was meant to flow to him and through him to share it with others. The farmer was self centered in the sense that he was only concerned about himself; he had no concern for anyone else.

Just listen to the language he uses in the story, “crops, my barns, my grain, my goods, my soul.” It was all about “me and mine,” and no one else. He had lost the duty to be concerned for others. He was only interested in Himself.

Then, he says to himself that now he can take his rest. This is his second big mistake. His first mistake was his selfishness. Then, he conveniently forgot where his harvest came from. Resting for him means that he will not have to plant again, not have to rely on the lands again, and not have to realize his dependence on God again.

“It was wrong,” Jesus says, “Share your good harvest. Store up riches in what matters to God.” Jesus does not condemn money or material possessions. Money and possessions can do great good when they are used wisely and kept in proper perspective.

Some of the great people of the Bible were very rich. Abraham, Isaac, and Solomon were perhaps the richest men of their times.

The man in the parable died before he learned the lesson of generosity, a generosity that God wants for all of us. He was blinded to any possible need of a neighbor, or the needs of the poor, or needs of a brother who might just be asking for a fair share of his inheritance.

In this parable, Jesus says to us, “where is your treasure?” Treasure has a special connection to the heart, the place of desire and longing, the place of will and focus. The thing we most set our heart on is our highest treasure. What do you treasure above all else? Money or life?

When Judgment Day comes, possessions are of no use. Our degrees and property holdings will not speak for us on that day, only how much love we shared with our brothers and sisters those who are around us. God will not ask how big is our bank account? God will not ask how much money we have or how much property we own? The question is not how can we store what we have. The question is, how shall we share what we have.

One success book from a few years ago suggests that we imagine ourselves dying three days from now and write our own obituary. It has been a part of some Catholic retreat programs for many years. Its purpose was not to focus on death but on life. What would you want your obituary to say? What would you want people to remember about your life?

When we go to meet the Lord, we leave behind everything we have and take with us everything we are and have become. If, as with the man in the parable, an accounting were required of you tonight, what would you bring to the Lord?