

## Wealth?

Homily of October 15, 2006

by Fr. Aidan McAleenan

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We are all in big trouble. Do you realize that? (“What now?” from someone in the congregation.) What now? Well the poorest country in the world is East Timor and they have a gross national product per person of five hundred dollars. So that means every day in that country they make about a dollar and twenty-five. What’s the richest country in the world? America? No! ...No! ....No! ....No! (in response to various answers from the group.) You’re all wrong! Number three is the United States. Number two is Norway, and the Number one richest country in the world is Luxembourg. They have fifty-five thousand one hundred dollars per year annual income. And the United States is just shy of thirty-eight thousand dollars. And you know why YOU’RE in trouble? According to this gospel, because we are in the fourth richest country in the United States, Contra Costa. We have over seventy-five thousand dollars a year in annual income, and probably a lot more for some. So people are saying, “Well, that’s not my income.” But either way, when you look at East Timor and you look at where we are, no matter where we are on the scale of rich and poor in the terms of our standard, we are all very rich.

So this gospel, if you were to take it very literally, really has something to say to us. It’s interesting because usually Jesus when he invited someone to follow him, he did not put a pre-requisite to the calling, e.g. the calling of Zaccheus the tax collector. “Come follow me.” He meets the guys on the beach when they are fishing and he says to Peter and the rest, “Come follow me.” He never puts a dictate in there or pre-requisite. “Come follow me.” But in this instance, I think, with the young man, he is calling us to a deeper relationship with God. And I think what he recognizes in the young man is that he is holding onto something, in this case, riches, that he just can’t turn away from. He feels a sense of safety and security, and he is rich and he is holding onto this, and he can’t get beyond that to follow Jesus, to give it up, in a sense. Positively speaking... He is aggressive. He is humble. And he is very religious. He is doing all the right things. But, yet, he can’t go that extra mile. He thinks that if he performs these things, that he will be able to win God.

But God is in relationship with us. God has loved us first. God’s hand is stretched out to us in love, and is calling us to an adult relationship with him, a loving and a caring relationship, not one where if you sit and say all of your prayers and your rosaries and come to Mass and do all the right things.... While those things are important and have their place, they have to be combined with an ADULT RELATIONSHIP with God. And I think that’s what Jesus is calling the young man to.

In terms of riches, it's really shocking for the disciples to hear Jesus say this because, when you think about it, in the Old Testament God's love and blessing seemed to be expressed through people being rich and plentiful.... You think of Job, for example. We have been listening to him in the readings through the weekdays recently. And Job had this relationship with God, a very loving strong relationship. So, the devil and God decide to put him to the test. Job loses everything and still he maintains his love for God and never denies that. When God repays him, when he stays steadfast in his love, what does he do? He pays him back double. He has nearly double the size of his family, double the size of land, double the size of everything. So, we can understand in our culture. It's very clear that we have a sense of security in our "things" that we have around us. Jesus is counter-cultural. He goes the absolute opposite. He doesn't have anything. He doesn't have a place to lay his head. He goes to the very, very opposite and, yet, he is telling this man to let go. And I think for us it may not be riches, but it may be something else in our lives that we are called to let go of, something that is making us turn toward that instead of turning towards God and a loving, caring, honest, wise relationship.

Sigmund Freud's favorite story was about the sailor shipwrecked on one of the South Sea Islands. He was seized by the natives, hoisted onto their shoulders, carried into the village, and sat on a crude throne. Little by little, he learned that it was their custom each year to make some man a king, king for a year. He liked it until he began to wonder what happened to all the former kings. Soon he discovered that, every year, when his kingship was ended, the king was banished to an island where he would starve to death. Not good, huh? So the sailor didn't like that either and he was smart because he was the king, the king for a year. So he put his carpenters to work making boats, his farmers to work transplanting fruit trees to the island, not to be a barren island, but an island of abundance.

So, this is a good parable of life. We are all kings and queens, kings and queens for a little while, while we are here on earth, able to choose what we shall do with the stuff of life. And I think that's very important to think of the "stuff of life." What is the "stuff of life" for us? What are the choices that we make? Now, last night, Kate (Everybody know our new youth minister, Kate? She talked a few weeks ago at Mass. She's really wonderful but she's from Boston and she's very opinionated. Isn't she?) Anyway, talking about the theme in my case is not focusing in on the riches. It's focusing in on having an adult relationship with God. And we have to have adult relationships in our own lives. So, I used the example when Father Brian dealt so well last Sunday with the issue of divorce and I thought in terms of adult relationships. Let's face it we are all wired differently, male and female. Aren't you, Ladies? (a loud "Yes!" from the ladies...) OK. We are wired differently. Men too! So, in a relationship, in an adult loving relationship, when you are for the other, you have to meet the other one half way. If you are in an intimate relationship in a marriage setting, it's often said (And this is where Kate was very critical! She said to me, "Well you did ask her for what she thought!" And she told me she thought I was being very stereotypical.) But in an intimate relationship, men go through intimacy to get to the physicalness of the relationship in a married relationship. Is that right, guys? C'mon guys, own up! And women go through the physicalness to get to the intimacy. So this is where Kate thought I was perpetuating this horrible stereotype. But either way, in a relationship, you have to

meet the other person somewhere in the middle. Right brain, left brain, different families of origin, etc., the two of you have to come together in a relationship and meet each other half way. And I think that is the sort of adult relationship we are called to with God. In a very powerful way, we have to be the best of our relationship as we relate with him as a loving God, as he loves us first. And if there is any desire, anything that takes us away from God, then that is the thing he is inviting us to get rid of and to follow him.

It's very difficult in our lives because we come up against a lot of difficulties. One of the greatest difficulties I think is you cannot accumulate so much so that it gets rid of the pain and the suffering that death causes in our lives. We just do not have that ability to take that away by accumulating, even though we do do this. For example, if you were running out of your house and it was a fire, what thing would you take with you?..... Your poodle? OK. I think I would take my photographs of my family and one or two things. Obviously it's about relationship, the things of relationship. It is things that are most important to us. ....(Conversing with members of the assembly.... Hopefully, you would take your wife too. Oh, she'd be out first? OK.) But I think it's very important to focus in on the important things in life. Did you see that poor guy, Lytle, who crashed into the high rise in New York? It was very interesting listening to the people speak about that afterwards. One of the guys on the A's team said, "Well, it makes you realize how fragile life is. And it also makes you realize what's most important in life is love and family and friends." And I think those are the things that are really important for us to focus in on.

In the nineteenth century, a tourist from the United States visited the famous Polish rabbi, Yasef Yassing. He was astonished to see the rabbi's home which was a simple room filled with books. The only furniture was a table and a bench. "Rabbi, where is your furniture?" asked the tourist. "Where is yours?" Yasef replied. "But I am only a visitor here, visiting you." And he said, "So am I." I think the point of the story is we need to focus in on our relationships and on the things that make us most happy in life which is when we face the challenges of life, when we face the issues of death and difficulty, when we face into those things and own them and accept them as part of life, then we can embrace them and the fear of them dissipates in some sense. And we are called to be in relationship with God. And so, I invite you to close your eyes for a moment. I can see all of your faces. You don't want me to come down and embarrass you. You want to all close your eyes? .... What thing in my life brings me closer to a real relationship with God? What thing in my life brings me to a wise relationship with God?..... (A few moments pause for individual thought.....)