25th Sunday, C, September 19, 2010

I had a very strong temptation today to speak about our 1st Reading, from the prophet Amos. First of all, I love Amos – he's a very forceful prophet, strong and vocal on behalf of social justice and the poor. And on top of that, this Sunday is our annual Elephant Stampede, and Fr. Phillip here is a very visible reminder of our friends in Malawi, who really need our support. Instead, though, I'll stick with our gospel, in which Jesus speaks about the Christian life, which of course certainly includes justice, service, and outreach to those in need.

Today's gospel parable has to be the strangest story that Jesus ever told. We hear the story of a man who is about to be dismissed from his place of responsibility. The reason given for his dismissal is irresponsibility, may even outright embezzlement. But before his dismissal becomes generally known, he gets busy collecting his master's receivable accounts at a reduced rate. One man owed for a hundred measures of oil...he settles with him for the price of fifty. Another man owed for a hundred measures of wheat...he settles with him for eighty. His reason for doing this was to secure his own future. He wanted those debtors to feel friendly toward him after he lost his job.

And so the parable ends with the man's employer commending him for his resourcefulness! And then Jesus applies the parable by saying, "The children of this world are wiser in their own generation than the children of light." What's going on here?

Well, it's obvious that Jesus was not praising the man's dishonesty. He simply comments that the children of this world are sometimes wiser than the children of the light. So it seems to me that he is talking about applying wisdom to our faith. He is saying that you and I can learn some lessons from this tragically dishonest man, that he showed some signs of wisdom that we could use. What might they be?

The first thing I see is that his actions were consistent with his purpose. His purpose was money. His immediate and number one concern was to insure and secure his own financial future. Now, of course it's obvious that his purpose was too small -- too short-sighted. There is nothing wrong with financial security...but when money becomes supreme, when economic considerations overshadow everything else, then life is sadly cheapened. Too many valuable things are sacrificed along the way.

This was the nature of the man's commitment. He wanted financial security, and he was willing to sacrifice anything, including his own integrity, to get it. He really is a tragic figure; but at least his actions were consistent with his purpose, and there is an earthly kind of wisdom to that.

Jesus, however, points out that often the children of light are often not so wise. Our stated purposes are certainly much more noble. Financial security is not despised, but neither is it supreme. Greater than the desire for money is the desire to be Christian men and women, disciples of Jesus. We want character that is strong, hearts that are compassionate and caring, minds that are active, alert, and attuned to the things of God.

These are the aspirations and desires that are part of our Christian calling. And we are here because we want to be Christian men and women in the most genuine sense of the word, aren't we? That is what we affirm...but perhaps each of us could ask ourselves what

actions we take to pursue those goals? Hey, that steward didn't just sit around, he called in all those creditors, he made deals! How rigorous and disciplined are we as Christians? Do we set aside a dedicated time to pray, to commune with God, every day? Do we worship regularly within our community, and with our whole being? How decisive are we as Christians, how willing are we to risk ourselves for the Lord...whether it's to risk our time and say, yes, I'm going to take responsibility for building the Kingdom of God around me. I'm going to give a half a day a week to cooking at the soup kitchen, or taking Communion to the sick, or visiting prisoners at the jail....or to risk my comfort or finances by committing to a 10% tithe, 5% to our community and 5% to other charities, people in need – those here close to us, and those on the other side of the world, in places like Malawi.

I know plenty of people -- you do too -- in fact, some of you know this applies to you... who work 50 or 60 hours a week for a financial livelihood, to secure a financial future. How hard do we work for our ***spiritual*** livelihoods, to secure our ***spiritual*** future? Jesus is saying we should apply our wisdom to our faith. If we wish to arrive in a certain city, we have to travel the road or catch the plane that goes there. If we wish to be genuinely Christian, then our actions must be consistent with our purpose. We must give ourselves daily to the kind of living that builds that kind of character.

Jesus summarized his appeal with these words: "No man can serve two masters. You cannot give yourself to both God and money." The man in our story recognized the truth of that. His goal was money, and so he gave himself wholeheartedly to it. You and I need to practice the same kind of consistency. Our goal is godliness... so we should give ourselves wholeheartedly to God.

Our steward in our parable had at least one other piece of wisdom that we would do well to notice, and apply to our lives. He did not have forever, and he knew it. His notice of termination had already been given. Every time he walked across a field, he knew him might not every pass that way again. Every time he talked with a tenant he was aware that he had to take advantage of that opportunity <u>then</u>, for it quite likely would never return again. He was facing a certain deadline, and he pursued his business with a sense of urgency.

You and I can learn a lesson from that... because we too live with a time limit. Our stewardship is also drawing to a close. Our response to this truth should not be with a spirit of desperation; but it should be with a sense of urgency.

These days and these years are priceless. Once they are gone, we can never call them back. And so the very essence of wisdom is to live this day with eagerness. Invest ourselves in love and service and friendship and commitment and generosity to others, things that we can keep for all eternity. This, I think, is what Jesus meant when he said, "Make friends for yourself through the use of this world's goods, so when they fail you, a lasting reception will be yours."

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