

A Christmas Carol

(for Ordinary Time)

18th Sunday of Ordinary Time – Year C

Ecclesiastes 1:2; 2:21-23
Psalms 90:3-4, 5-6, 12-13, 14, 17

Colossians 3:1-55, 9-11
Luke 12:13-21

At the risk of being caught out of season, we've all heard this story before. Ebenezer Scrooge, the miser of Dickens' "A Christmas Carol" is being warned by the miserable spirit of his former partner, Jacob Marley, to change his ways lest he suffer the same fate. In what was intended to be a compliment Scrooge comments to Marley's Ghost: "You were always a good man of business." To this, Marley replies: "Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence, were, all, my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business!"

The true essence of Marley's misery is powerfully and hauntingly seen in the vision Scrooge has of the countless phantoms "wandering hither and thither in restless haste, and moaning as they went." Having failed in their own lifetimes to show compassion, they are, instead, weighed down by material concerns, to which they are now chained for all eternity, doomed to powerlessly observe the

human misery they so ignored in their lifetimes. "The misery of them all was, clearly, that they sought to interfere for good, in human matters, and had lost the power forever."

All three Mass readings of the 18th Sunday of Ordinary Time

lend themselves to a declaration of the futility of selfishly accumulating material possessions for their own sake, sacrificing our integrity as Christians at the altar of avarice and ambition. Invariably one's focus is wrenched away from Christ and more to the accumulation, maintenance and protection of material goods.

The message from Holy Scriptures cannot, however, be said to be against providing oneself with personal security. There is no condemnation for ambition. Rather such

ambition is vanity if it is devoid of any semblance of generosity. The tendency for any concern for material goods, no matter how justifiable and necessary, can easily consume us, causing us to so focus within ourselves and our own needs and ambitions that the generosity we are called to share as Christians is nothing more than a void.



Parable of the Rich Fool

The Apostles, themselves, are portrayed as having to deal with the administration of material goods in order to provide for the needs of the community and fund the work of the early Church (Acts 4:34-35). Today the Church throughout the world must face the task of the administration of material goods so as to finance the work of a diocese, and in some cases, assist other churches in need. We all know the awesome task of providing for one's family. Religious communities, too, must concern themselves with the "accumulation of wealth" in order to finance their work. We see a great similarity between the Rich Fool in the Gospel, and Jacob Marley in *A Christmas Carol*, whose concerns for material security are focused only on themselves – hence the description of such individuals as misers.

The issue is in the direction toward which these concerns are aimed. The accumulation of material goods is a fact of life and, from time past, the world we live in makes personal and financial (ergo material) security a basic need and concern. The readings from Ecclesiastes and the Gospel of Luke express the miserable cynicism of one who lives only for oneself. St. Paul, in his letter to the Colossians directs a focus on "higher realms", putting aside the concerns of the earth. The sum of it all is that we are called to have a vision that goes beyond ourselves – to our families, our community, our Church and ultimately to our God. Ambition for material gain is not condemned, but such ambition must ultimately be focused on the generosity we as Christians are called to show, especially to the poor and those in need.



Dickens may well have had in mind the Parable of the Rich Fool, or the beginning of the Book of Ecclesiastes when he developed the moral foundation for "A Christmas Carol"; the hopeless misery of Jacob Marley and the story of Ebenezer Scrooge's moral conversion can well lend itself to the sentiments of the readings presented to us on the 18th Sunday of Ordinary Time. The Rich Fool could easily be substituted for Ebenezer Scrooge in its moral dilemma, if not in its solution as the potential end for Scrooge should he not change his ways. The first reading from Ecclesiastes could very well be the Lamentation of Jacob Marley and the countless phantoms when faced with an eternity of wandering the earth, locked and chained to the very vanities with which they wasted their lives. Finally, the reading from Colossians, we may hear Ebenezer's final resolution after the visit of the three spirits – "mankind [is] my business."

Christmas was an appropriate context for the fable Charles Dickens presents in "A Christmas Carol" just as Christmas, in the sense that we celebrate Dickens, is the ideal time to celebrate a spirit of generosity. However, we as Christians must look beyond a particular day or season (even a particular author) to see that we are called to that same generosity throughout the year. We are called to always recognize the ultimate vanity of worldly ambitions and to "set our heart on what pertains to higher realms."

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