

24th Sunday after Pentecost



The Rich Fool

(Lk 12:16-21; 8:8)

WHAT DOES IT MEAN to be “rich toward God” (Lk 12:21)? Many of us may remember the concept of spiritual bouquets promoted by many Roman Catholic religious orders in schools and churches, particularly before Vatican II. A person accomplished so many Masses, so many Communions, so many rosaries, etc. which were then offered for another person or a special intention. This practice, which urged many people to more frequent devotional practices than they would have observed otherwise, was a kind of piety of numbers: the more you do, the better.

Is this what the Lord Jesus meant by being “rich towards God”? Instead of amassing earthly treasures are we intended to accumulate spiritual “points” which we can bring with us when we stand before the Judge? Such an approach can bring us close to the Pharisee in Christ’s parable who lists his spiritual accomplishments in contrast to the repentant Publican. At best it reveals our faith as immature, incapable of digesting spiritual meat (see 1 Cor 3:2).

Our True Wealth Is God

The actual treasure which is ours as the adopted children of God is nothing less than “to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge that you may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph 3:19). We are, as St. Paul insists, a temple in which God dwells both individually and as Church. Our ability to know God begins with His indwelling presence within us.

We certainly know that God loves us in Christ, and may believe that He dwells in us but it often seems to be an abstraction: something we know is true but doesn’t touch us in any significant way. “God loves us... Michelangelo gave us great art... Bell gave us the telephone...” we may know all these things in the same way. But to know God’s love in a way “that passes knowledge” is to do so in a manner that goes beyond intellectual knowledge to a knowledge of the heart.

As St. Paul says here, this knowledge is not an end in itself but enables us to be filled with God’s fullness. Once our hearts are opened by a realization of how God loves us, they can experience God’s saving presence. This presence transforms us – deifies us – making us sharers of His divine nature, which the Greek Fathers call theosis.

Some people have achieved this “knowledge past understanding” through the direct intervention of God. God makes Himself known unexpectedly to people and energizes their lives dramatically. St Gregory of Nyssa, for example, testifies that “One night there appeared to Basil an outpouring of light, and, by means of divine power, the

entire dwelling was illuminated by an immaterial light, having no source in anything material” (Funeral Oration for His Brother, Basil the Great).

Most of us, however, have not had such an experience. How do we begin to arrive at this knowledge? Our attentiveness to prayer, the sacraments and the Scriptures are certainly signs that we look to know God. Still, our contact with the Bible and the Church’s liturgy is intermittent. Even if we pray every day, these acts of openness to God are intermittent. Can ordinary people be in more constant communion with God than that?

Sitting in the Presence of God

St. Isaac the Syrian insists that we can and must commune with God continually to be on regular speaking terms with Him, as it were. *“Sit in the presence of the Lord every moment of your life, as you think of Him and recollect Him in your heart. Otherwise, when you only see Him after a period of time, you will lack the freedom to converse with Him, out of shame; for great freedom of conversation is born out of constant association with Him.”*

What St Isaac calls *“sitting in the presence of God”* others in both East and West have described as developing an awareness of the presence of God. We regularly pray that God *is “everywhere present and filling all things”* (“O heavenly King”), but are more frequently unaware of God’s presence as we go about our daily tasks. As the Divine Liturgy expresses it, *“Christ is in our midst – He is and ever shall be.”*

Even more compelling is the realization that the Spirit of God is not only with us but also within us through baptism, that we are members of the Body of Christ. If God “dwells within us,” then everything we do is in the presence of God although we regularly forget it. Developing an **awareness of the presence of God**, then, simply means keeping the memory of God in our thoughts, and living like we really mean it.

Many people have learned to use an everyday event to trigger their awareness that God is present now. It may be an icon at one’s desk or kitchen counter, the ringing of a telephone or the sight of a child. Whenever they encounter their “trigger” they say a brief prayer.

Learning to Focus on God’s Presence

Setting aside time for silent reflection helps us refocus our attention on the presence of God in our midst. Spiritual writers of all ages recommend that we go apart – to our rooms, the outdoors, a church – where we can be undisturbed. There we can disengage from the

activities of the day, close our eyes and begin to focus on the unceasing presence of God in which we stand. A time of silence may be enhanced by a simple breathing exercise to help us concentrate on the fact that we are in the holy presence of God.

St John Climacus, the 7th century abbot of Mount Sinai and author of *The Ladder*, suggests the next step. *“Become aware of God, in whose presence you are while you pray,”* he writes. *“Then take a formula of prayer and recite it with perfect attention both to the words you are saying and to the Person to whom you are saying them.”* In time the Jesus Prayer – Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner – became the standard prayer in the Byzantine Churches for resting in the presence of God.

Sit quietly and repeat the prayer without hurrying for whatever length of time you have set apart for sitting in God’s presence. It is good to have a regular period of time for this activity – e.g. 15 minutes, for a start – which may be adjusted as circumstances dictate. Counseling 17th century nuns, the Bishop of Geneva, St Francis de Sales, suggests a different kind of adjustment than we would normally consider. *“Half an hour’s meditation is essential except when you are very busy,”* he teaches. *“Then a full hour is needed.”* The more harried we are by stress at home or work, the more we need to focus on the presence of God to bring us peace.

Brother Lawrence, the 17th century Carmelite monk, whose teachings are recorded in the book *The Practice of the Presence of God*, adds another dimension to our consideration of our true wealth as Christians. We are fulfilling our eternal calling as people devoted to the worship of God *“I am doing now what I will do for all eternity,”* he exclaimed. *“I am blessing God, praising Him, adoring Him, and loving Him with all my heart.”*

~ Office of Educational Services, Eparchy of Newton