

**18th Sunday in Ordinary Time
August 1, 2010
10 am Liturgy**

Today's readings do not make for good summer beach fare. In fact, they are downright depressing—at least on the surface. It all starts with good old Qoheleth, the supposed author of Ecclesiastes. I ask myself: Where was his Prozac when he really needed it? He certainly sounds dour as he laments, “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.” That's “vanity” as in vain, pointless, empty, desolate. He describes us saying: “All their days sorrow and grief are their occupation.” Whew! And these are just the opening lines of the book. It actually gets worse as you read on.

Reginald Fuller, the rather famous Anglican scripture scholar, said once in a classic British understatement: “Ecclesiastes is not so much good news as it is the bad news that has to be heard before the good news becomes audible.”

And Jesus does not help things much in today's gospel. He wisely side-steps the invitation to get involved in settling a family will—who wouldn't do that even today—but then tells a very sobering parable. It is a parable about a man who is called a fool by God. This poor man actually thinks he is going to take his great wealth with him. His greed knows no bounds; it borders on idolatry. He is building mega-mansions and huge barns for safe-keeping. And in the only parable in the New testament where God actually appears in the

story, God is not pleased! “For whom are you saving all this? Fool, your life is required this very night!” It is over!

Now that is depressing, and scary. But I’m doing the best I can with these readings so far. Just try to think of them as sobering rather than depressing. But it is a startling call to sobriety, don’t you think? No one is suggesting that the rich bounty of the earth or the hard work required to produce it are bad things. They are just not ultimate things. Nothing is ultimate without God as the final reference point. And that’s really the point of the whole liturgy today. It is a kind of exhortation: don’t lose perspective on life or you too may end up feeling foolish. That’s not what life is about.

Later in the Book of Ecclesiastes (chapter 5), Qoheleth echoes Job, another at least slightly depressed Old Testament figure, and says the same thing quite succinctly: “Naked I came forth from my mother’s womb, and naked I shall return.” It is a line frequently used at funeral liturgies. You know it’s true of all of us. Here today, gone tomorrow. And we ain’t takin’ nothin’ with us! Wealth, power, reputation, books, DVD’s: Nothing!

Speaking of funerals, sometimes the best advice about life and death comes from tombstone epitaphs. We probably all know the old saying that no one’s tombstone has been found saying: “I wish I spent more time at the office.”

Some other epitaphs are helpful to offer perspective to us all.

**Henry Smith of Albany, New York had this inscription on his tombstone:
“Born 1903. Died 1942. Looked up the elevator shaft to see if the car was on
the way down. It was.” You never know the time, do you? In Thurmont,
Maryland, one says: “Here lies an Atheist, all dressed up and nowhere to go.”
You also never know what the other side really holds, do you? In Silver City,
Nevada, a tombstone says this: “Here lays The Kid. We planted him raw. He
was quick on the trigger, but slow on the draw.” Sometimes, we shoot
ourselves in more than the foot.**

**As it is the weekend we celebrate our Patron, St. Ignatius of Loyola, I
thought perhaps his take on today’s sentiment might be more palatable—and a
little softer. His message is really the same as today’s readings. We are all
created for a reason. We are a gift to the earth from God. We are gifted with
all the marvels of creation (including for some of us wealth and power and
riches) and they are all good. But our real purpose here is finally to return to
that source from which we came. That’s the only reason we’re here!**

**In his own words at the very beginning of his *Spiritual Exercises* known
as “The First Principle and Foundation,” he says this. “We are created to
praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by this means to save our souls.**

The other things on the face of the earth are created to help us in attaining the end for which we were created. Hence, we are to use them in so far as they help us in the attainment of this end, and we must rid ourselves of them in so far as they hinder us.... Our one desire and choice should be what is more conducive to the end for which we were created.” (Sp Ex #23)

St. Paul says much the same thing when he writes to the Colossians. Discern carefully what leads to death and what to life. And always keep before you that, in the end, “Christ is all and in all.” That’s all that really matters.

So, maybe there’s no need to pass the Prozac after all. Just hear the sobering call. And try not to be foolish about it. Because someday we will all hear the call: this day your life is required. Let’s hope the next line is: “Welcome into the Kingdom prepared for you before the foundation of the world.” The moral is: choose wisely and live.