

25th Sunday 2007

995 Fifth Avenue. The finest Penthouse on Fifth; Occupancy Early 2008 \$47.5 million. This ad that appeared in the opening pages of the Times Magazine section caught my eye with its mind boggling price tag. The fine print is just as “mind-boggling. “We are pledged to the letter and spirit of US policy for the achievement of equal housing opportunity throughout the nation.’ ...there are no barriers to housing because of race, color, religion, sex, handicap, familial status or national origin. The only barrier is well “Money”. Equal opportunity! You’ve got to be kidding!

Ordinarily this kind of ad would not have caught my attention, certainly not the fine print. But hearing the words of the prophet Amos who decries the imbalance between the rich and the poor in his society and the chasm between “those who have” and “those who have not”, the “equal opportunity” and “no barriers” in the “fine print” became pretty dramatic.

If you were to ask Amos, I don’t think he would be in favor of Casinos, legalized gambling, making money off the human weakness called greed and “get rich quick” schemes. But what about Jesus? What would Jesus say? Would he praise the ingenuity of the lobbyists who wheel and deal to get their way because of their energy, determination and craftiness? In the parable, the dishonest steward gets some praise from the rich master for his astuteness. God only knows how the rich master made his money. (Maybe the master will hire him back, capitalizing on his ingenuity!) I have to admit that I don’t know much about the ethics of legalized gambling. You’d have to turn to Fr Rich McGowan, a Jesuit in the business school who is one of the nation’s experts on gambling. Sounds like something a Jesuit would be involved in! In his OpEd in the Boston Globe on this issue the other day, he sounded like a Jesuit, giving both sides and finishing with a comment about the “common good vs. the individual’s rights”, leaving us to ask ourselves the question, “What really is the common good?” Jesus does the same thing, I believe with this parable of the dishonest steward. He lets the hearer of the parable reach his or her own conclusions. It certainly makes you stop and think. “Is this someone you would want to emulate?” Maybe Jesus was thinking like a Jesuit, at least in the first part of the gospel and like a Franciscan in the last part. You can not serve God and Money. You will love the one and hate the other.

So what is the question at the heart of our Scriptures today?

The question may very well be how you use the gifts that you have. How do you use the material and spiritual gifts you have. Do you use them for “self-indulgence, acting out of self-interest” or are they for the other, for the common Good, the greater Good? St Ignatius has some wisdom here in his principle and foundation of the Spiritual Exercises. He says all the gifts of creation are meant to serve the purpose for which we are created. And that purpose is to praise, reverence and serve God, Our Lord and by this means to “save one’s soul”. It is when possessions, money, fame, etc become ends in themselves that we run into trouble. When they blind us from seeing that nothing is really ours, and act and live as if that is what life is all about we run into problems.

The question we can take home with us today is whether we use what we have wisely and well and for the common good or whether we “squander” the gifts we have. There’s a whole lot of squandering going on in the gospels these weeks. The younger son in last week’s parable squanders his inheritance, the steward squanders his master’s goods, next week the rich man squanders his wealth on “purple and fine linens and great feasts” not noticing the Poor man Lazarus begging at his gates”. It’s only when the chasm between rich and poor is transformed into a chasm of eternal joy and suffering that his eyes are opened to his own self-absorption in life.

So my question to all of us this morning/evening is “do we squander the gifts we have been given”? We may not have the “equal opportunity” to purchase a penthouse on fifth ave, but we do have the “equal opportunity” to use what we have for the greater good, to help to alleviate the suffering of the poor, to advocate for the basic economic necessities of life for all.

I leave with the central question that Ignatius asks in the Exercises, “What have I done for Christ, What am I doing for Christ, What will I do for Christ”? Christ whose face we see all around us, especially in the eyes of the poor.