

18<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle C  
Ecclesiastes 1:2; 2:21-23  
Psalm 90:3-4, 5-6, 12-13, 14, 17  
Colossians 3:1-5, 9-11  
Luke 12:13-21  
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It's tempting to think that cultures, like human beings, have a lifecycle. Like individual humans, societies seem to progress through stages of youth, maturity and old age. Successful young cultures enjoy a period of confident, enthusiastic, expansion. Over time they gradually learn that things are less straightforward and more complicated than they initially appeared to be. Actions based on time-honored assumptions about what is good and true repeatedly turn out to have unintended deleterious consequences. Finally, if they endure long enough, cultures acquire a kind of world-weary wisdom.

As an example of a society in the first bloom of youth, consider the warrior culture depicted in the Old English epic poem, *Beowulf*. The events related in the poem occur in fifth century Scandinavia. On the surface at least, the values governing the good life in the poem are clear and simple. A warrior owes allegiance to his warlord. A warlord rewards loyalty and martial prowess with gifts of weapons, gold and generous hospitality. To die in the service of one's lord is a glorious thing. A warrior aspires to achieve immortality by having his exploits sung by the bards after his death. From our cultural vantage, this can all seem terribly naïve and child-like. Like a child, a warrior is rewarded for good behavior with treats and shiny new toys. And we can't help but notice that the dead warrior who is remembered in song is still dead. The cynical attitude

of an older culture to these youthful values can be found in the Monty Python song, “Brave Sir Robin Ran Away.” As examples of a society rapidly aging, think of the United States before and after the Vietnam War, or compare European culture before World War I to the state of the society after World War II.

For an example of the world-weary wisdom characteristic of an ancient society, we need look no further than our First Reading from Ecclesiastes: “vanity of vanities! All things are vanity!” In other words, everything is in vain. Nothing ultimately matters. “For what profit comes to a man from all the toil and anxiety of heart with which he has labored under the sun? All his days sorrow and grief are his occupation; even at night his mind is not at rest. This also is vanity.”

G. K. Chesterton argues that these dark thoughts are characteristic of any number of ancient cultures. He refers specifically to the ancient civilizations of Asia. He argues that by the time of Jesus Christ, Roman culture, with its roots in ancient Greece, was teetering on the brink of following Asia into apathy, only to be rescued at the last moment by the arrival of Christianity. The Good News of Jesus Christ infused European culture with hope, purpose, and renewed vitality.

In our Gospel, we find our Lord grappling with precisely these issues. He relates the story of the rich man who plans to build larger barns to hold his grain and other goods. Then, he thinks, he will have “good things stored up for many years, so that he can “rest, eat, drink, be merry.” But God says to him, “You fool, this very night your life will be demanded of you; and the things you have prepared, to whom will they belong?” To this point, Jesus is repeating the message of Ecclesiastes: All is vanity. But now, crucially, he offers an alternative: “Thus will it be

for all who store up treasure for themselves but are not rich in what matters to God.” So, treasures rich in what matters to God matter. They endure.

Our reading from Colossians makes much the same point: “seek what is above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Think of what is above, not what is on earth...When Christ your life appears, then you too will appear with him in glory.” Seeking what is above does not leech the meaning out of our earthly life; rather it infuses our everyday life with meaning that it otherwise lacks. Now our virtues, our choices, and the way we treat one another all matter. They have consequences that endure into eternal life.

As our culture ages around us, and flirts with the suspicion that in the end nothing really matters, our faith once again holds out hope to our world. It is up to us to bear witness to how beautiful and purposeful life can be when “Christ is all in all.”