

Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, C – July 31, 2022 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 7:15, 8:30, and 11am Sunday Masses – 740 words

Usually, in the past, when I've preached on Qoheleth, I've focused on how his worldview extended essentially only to the limits of this world. He did not look out toward eternity; he saw death as not only the great leveler but also the great conclusion. And so it was that he cried out, "Vanity of vanities! All things are vanity!" His view was incomplete – he did not yet have the benefit of the full and complete revelation that our Lord Jesus Christ brought. Even still, that's not to say that he was all wrong, either. Today, I would like to talk about something that he said in the passage we just heard, that is a real concern that many of us have.

"Here is one", he lamented, "who has labored with wisdom and knowledge and skill, and yet to another who has not labored over it, he must leave his property. This also is vanity and a great misfortune." There are really two things within this passage that bear consideration. There is the first part of it, about those who really do labor "with wisdom and knowledge and skill" – those who strive to give life their best effort or 100%. Yet there are others, perhaps many, who are either lazy or lucky, if you will – who do not give it their all or even their half, but still make out OK or even quite well. It leads us to consider the general unfairness of life.

But then there is the second part of the passage, about how those who have done nothing or little to merit the fruits of our labors, may ultimately benefit from them all the same. And among those beneficiaries, some of them are ingrates and some of them feel entitled to what we leave behind. Hence, the property disputes that arise, that our Lord referred to in the gospel. It's a problem that most of us must reckon with either directly or indirectly at some time or another in our families or among our friends. Such problems sometimes even arise among those who thought they could avoid them! Here we see the general messiness of life.

What is the point then? Why should we work hard while others rest in laziness or rely on luck, and why should we strive to leave a good legacy behind when others might well make a grand mess of it? Life is both so unfair and so messy! We can readily share Qoheleth's concerns. But this is also where he ran out of answers. And Jesus fills in the blanks. He points us toward heaven and toward being rich in what matters to God. If we use the gifts he has given us and leave a legacy that is, above all, a monument to his glory, then we will be wealthy in a way that can never be considered vanity or a misfortune – or ever be taken from us.

Working for the glory of God is something that we can all readily appreciate. We have tried it – and we know by firm faith that he will reward us for striving for goodness and even excellence. But what about the messiness of life? Here we struggle more. Not everyone deserves the gifts they are given. But our struggle, I think, is proportionate to how much we focus on others rather than ourselves. If we had a better appreciation for the messes we have made, we should not focus so much on the messes of others. Yet the Lord continues to give us gifts all the same! He takes that risk, of letting us mess up – he takes that risk with all.

No, Qoheleth was not all wrong; in fact, he had concerns that we, too, share. What he was missing was seeing how his life was "hidden with Christ in God" – of both looking out toward eternity and seeing Jesus there with him. We have access to that benefit, and so we can fill in the blanks that he could not. The challenge for us is to wake up each day and see it as a day with Jesus Christ, a day in which we identify with him, work for his glory – indeed, as a day when we will strive to live a well-ordered life and let him deal with the unfairness and the messes that might happen no matter what. He will always make us rich in what truly matters!