

28th Sunday (B)

11th October 2015

'Adopted poverty'

Wis 7: *wisdom more priceless than gold* Ps 89: *make us know the shortness of our life that we may gain wisdom of heart* Heb 4: *Word of God alive and active*
Mk 10: 17–30: *Go and sell everything you own*

My thoughts are already turning to World Youth Day, next year in Krakow, Poland, when Pope Francis will gather together 2 million young Catholics from around the world for a week's celebration and formation in faith. I recall the first World Youth Day that I attended as a priest (in Rome, in the year 2000) and that experience happens to be relevant to Our Lord's message today about the challenge of wealth and of giving it up.

The culmination of that Rome pilgrimage was an evening prayer vigil which the Pope led in a vast campus on the edge of Rome. Over two million of us gathered there for a night under the stars. The enormity of the gathering was quite something, and what a spectacle: 2 million candles burning in witness to this one enormous prayer rising from the face of the earth. But another image came to me as I wandered around this overnight city: that of a shanty town or refugee camp. Each person there had little more than a sleeping bag and some food and water: sleeping bodies and empty plastic water bottles everywhere you looked. That was it, adopted poverty for a night. And I thought how good a reminder that was of the fact that millions of people

around the world spend not just a night in those sorts of conditions, but every night and every day of their life. For a one night this temporary city of spiritual highs and high spirits was an uplifting experience of universal fellowship, the Church in action, uniting God's young people. But if you think of that as being the conditions to live in for life, then the reality of poverty really comes home to you.

Of course when we think of poverty we think of something bad, something we do our best to relieve, and rightly so: no-one should go without the basics of survival; no-one should have to suffer the misery of starvation or homelessness. But today's Gospel urges the rich young man to *take up* poverty. That same message was a challenge taken up in the 13th c. in Assisi, by St Francis: he was a young man from a privileged family who gave up all he had; he handed back to his father all the finery he'd been used to wearing. St Francis went round preaching, and begging for his living. He was a rich young man who did take Jesus's words to heart, "give up all you possess," unlike the rich young man that Jesus met.

What's the point of adopting poverty voluntarily like St Francis did, and like religious brothers and sisters do today? What's the benefit in going without, in giving up legitimate

wealth? A few attempts at some answers ...

(I) At World Youth Day, the fact that everyone arrived by foot to the vigil, and that the food and water were given to us, and we each had little with us just a bit of bedding, meant that there were no barriers between us. No barriers of class or of wealth. We could share what was important, our common humanity and our common faith. Possessions and the jealousies they can bring were not an issue. The poverty of that night brought us closer together; there weren't 'things' to get in the way.

(II) As St Francis showed, there is a great joy to be had in letting go of the trappings of wealth. Francis was a rich young man who went on his way happy, revelling in the splendour of God's creation, unlike the rich young man of the Gospel who went on his way sad, unable to take up Jesus's challenge and give up the riches of man's creation. A friend of mine worked in Manila for five years, teaching Filipino children in the street from a mobile library: she said something similar to me once, that their poverty didn't diminish their happiness: they were eager to learn and impeccably behaved!

What about us? If we can't give up everything, what can we do? For a start let's not be embarrassed if we are poorer than someone next door; shouldn't we be more embarrassed if

we're richer than next door? Trying to 'keep up with the Joneses' wastes time and sets up barriers between people — instead we should look to be at one with others, and the less we have, the easier it is to be close to people. Jesus didn't live a destitute life, but by all accounts lived a moderately poor life. Therefore do not be ostentatious with riches — neither hoard nor be lavish, but live as you need to, and in quietness and humility give what you can away to those in need.

Another thing we can do is to give personal support to those who feel they *are* called to give up even more. If there's someone you know who does feel able to respond to Jesus's radical challenge to give up family and livelihood then don't do them down; help young people make that choice for the religious life or the priesthood ... even if that means you giving up some hoped-for grandchildren!

We *can* imitate Jesus and be happy with less. It gives us more time for others if we are spending less time spending, and it give us more time for God. I always love this line from the book of Proverbs and it sums it up so neatly:

*Give me neither poverty nor riches;
grant me only my share of bread to eat
for fear that surrounded by plenty I should fall away
and say, "The Lord — who is the Lord?"*