

Sunday 28.09

Years ago a group of us were hanging up our coats on hooks near the front door of the restaurant where we were going to have dinner. When one member of the group was about to hang up her coat, I asked her if she really wanted to do that. I said that because her coat looked like a very expensive one. Maybe it would be safer, I thought, on the back of her chair once we sat down. But she said she was not concerned. After all, it was only a coat, no matter how expensive it was. The woman was giving me a lesson in values. She was saying what our first reading and Gospel tell us today: material possessions are not that important.

That was a very impressive lesson I was given, and I should have been very impressed. I was impressed but not very impressed, and the reason for that was the fact that the woman who owned the coat was wealthy. If the coat had been stolen, she could have replaced it the next day without batting an eye. You remember the story of the poor widow in the Gospels whom Jesus sees putting her last penny in the temple collection box. He says that she has given more than all the other people because they gave out of their surplus but she gave all, gave out of her need, her poverty. That is why I was not

very impressed. My wealthy dinner partner was viewing the possible loss of her coat out of her position of wealth, not of need. To tell the truth, I might have been more impressed if this woman had been more concerned about her coat because that would have told me that she was careful with her wealth and not extravagant with it.

What people impress you the most with the way they handle money? Is it the very wealthy we read about in the papers, the super-rich who have numerous homes and yachts and expensive cars? Maybe some of us envy them. We would like to drive an expensive car. We would like to have a vacation home in the Bahamas. But, in our saner moments, we know that it is better to have our health and our families and our friends than an expensive car or vacation home. If we could have both together, that would be fine. But if we had to choose between the two, if we have our heads screwed on correctly, that is, if we are half-way human, and if we have listened to the Gospels, then we will always choose family and friends over possessions.

And yet wealth is such a blinder. This past week in the paper there was the story of the very wealthy woman Brooke Astor, the widow of one of the Astors, an extremely wealthy family. Her son by a

previous marriage was convicted of taking advantage of his mother's failing mind and helping himself to her nearly 200 million dollars fortune. He says he is innocent and will appeal the verdict. May he be proven innocent! But if he is guilty, then we have an example of wealth being so tempting that a son took advantage of his demented mother. Even worse, it is this man's own son who brought his father to trial. Wow! What wealth can do! Therefore we should be glad that we are not playing with an Astor fortune. We too might be blinded by that much wealth.

Jesus says in today's Gospel that it is harder for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God than it is for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle. Some want to soften the strength of this saying by pointing out that the Lord may have been talking about a smaller gate to the city of Jerusalem which was called the Eye of the Needle gate. Maybe a camel could just barely get through such a gate. I prefer to take the remark straight up and see it as the Lord's use of exaggeration to make a point. Just as the Lord tells us to cut off arms or legs or gouge out an eye if they prevent us from entering the Kingdom of God, so here he does the same thing. He exaggerates to make his point. It is as impossible for the rich to enter into the Kingdom as it is for a camel to get through a needle's eye.

If that is the case, then no Christians should be rich, or if they are rich, they must make sure that they are not so attached to their wealth that it causes them to lose their proper sense of values, that they don't begin to value their wealth more than their family, their friends, more than honesty and generosity. Certainly, we know that the church itself in its history has looked to the wealthy for support. Indeed, in my own order, the Jesuits, there is now an annual gala where we honor outstanding Catholics. But I can't help noticing that these Catholics happen to be wealthy too. I think we have to be careful there. The generosity of the wealthy can and should be recognized, but it should not be recognized if their generosity is not just one sign of a life which is Christian in its overall orientation.

When we as a church look at our world, we see one which is very unbalanced with respect to wealth. As in our nation, so too in the world there is an awful imbalance of the world's wealth. Too few have too much of it; too many are deprived of what is needed to live a really decent human life. That is why recent popes have distanced themselves from a form of capitalism which is unbridled, which allows wealth and the accumulation of wealth to function without any moral restraints That is why the bishops of our country

preach that people, simply as people, have the right to education and health care. Now how that is brought about is another question, but the principle remains in place. Wealth is not an end in itself; the common good is, and the common good demands that a society be structured in such a way that the right of all its citizens to education and health care be able to be exercised.

And for us? We should live within our means. We should work. Yes, work is also a human right, and a society which does not make it possible for its citizens to work is doing them an injustice. We should pay our bills. We should put family and friends before possessions. We should use whatever we have after paying our bills and taking decent care of ourselves to give to others who have less than we have. In short, we should not be rich in the bad sense because if we are we will not get through that narrow gate which leads into the Kingdom of God.

May God grant us wisdom to use the material things of our world well, to use them as a means of serving God and our neighbor. Then we will die rich in the Lord and enter His Kingdom.