

Sunday Sermon

Fr Ambrose Young
Entrance of the Theotokos Skete



Sunday, November 20, 2011

Today's Gospel is: Luke 12: 16-21

"Lord, make me to know mine end, and the number of my days, what it is, that I may know what I lack...Surely man walketh about as a phantom, nay, in vain doth he disquiet himself: he layeth up treasures, and knoweth not for whom he gathereth them...Nay, all things are vanity, every man living." (Psalm 38)

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The psalm from which I have just quoted was a prayer by King David the Psalmist, asking for wisdom about life—his life—and death. It bears repeating:

"Lord, make me to know mine end, and the number of my days, what it is, that I may know what I lack...Surely man walketh about as a phantom, nay, in vain doth he disquiet himself: he layeth up treasures, and knoweth not for whom he gathereth them...Nay, all things are vanity, every man living." (Psalm 38)

In a moment you will see how this Psalm relates to this morning's dramatic but short Gospel parable, a parable that speaks to us of the many cares we have in life and the possibility of sudden death. It is appropriately called the Parable of the Rich Fool. The Lord gave this parable in response to a man who complained to him that he had not received his rightful inheritance. Jesus' intent was to show how we are too often preoccupied with material, personal, and worldly interests that do not affect the outcome of our lives and our eternal destination after death. As He said on another occasion, "For what shall it profit a man if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" (Matt. 16:26)

So, He taught this Parable:

The Rich Man had been so successful in his life that he wanted to build new storehouses for his goods, which were many. He was preparing for retirement and a life of leisure. He did not consider that his wealth was a gift from God and that he must be a good steward of that wealth. He believed that this was all due to his own hard work and cleverness and he could do whatever he wished with what he had earned. But then, suddenly, he literally dropped dead.

We are reminded of the searing indictment of St. James in his epistle where he says, "Go to now, ye rich men, weep and howl for your miseries that shall come upon you! Your riches are corrupted, and your garments re moth-eaten. Your gold and silver is cankered; and the rust of them shall be a witness

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against you, and shall eat your flesh as it were fire. Ye have heaped together treasure for the last days...Ye have lived in pleasure on the earth, and been wanton...Ye have condemned and killed the just." (James 5:1-6)

But this does not mean that the rich cannot be saved. Everything depends upon how one uses one's wealth. Everything. The deeper point of this parable, however, as the Holy Fathers teach us, is that all of us are extremely rich or heavy laden in worries and cares and distractions, in desires and wishes and sins—and *these* are precisely what make us like the Rich Fool in the parable: we have heaped up huge stores of resentments and remembrance of wrongs, of worries and fears about ourselves and others, and this "baggage" will not save us. Rather, if we die in this state, it will drag us down to hell, as surely as the chains which the ghost of Marley in a "Christmas Carol" had forged in his life dragged him down and kept him out of paradise

Of course we live in a culture that has constantly brainwashed us into being greedy, into always wanting more, when it comes to material things. Yet 99% of these things we do not even really need. And we have been brainwashed also into thinking that it's "normal" to be constantly worrying and fretting about our lives, other people, and so forth. But you most certainly will not find even one word, even one iota, in Scripture that supports such thinking! Yet this is the way of our world.

St. Nicolai Velimirovitch writes: "The Lord Jesus, the Lover of mankind, brought with Him and opened to men innumerable and incomparable heavenly gifts, and invited us to take them openly and freely, on one condition: that we first wrest our souls away from corruptible earthly goods" and from the worries, distractions, and temptations of daily life.

This morning's parable also reminds us that sudden death is not a desirable thing at all, for it gives no time for repentance, for making peace with everyone, for getting our spiritual house in order. Unless he dies repentant, a person may well have deprived himself of the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, as St. Nicolai says, "Blessed are they who experience sickness before their deaths, enduring pain and suffering. Such a one is given the opportunity to look back over the whole of his life, to survey and count his sins, to repent of all the evil he has done and all the good he has not done, to weep with repentance and lament before God, cleansing his soul with tears, and to beg God for forgiveness; also to forgive all who have insulted or done evil to him during his lifetime, to bless all his friends and enemies, to remind his children to fear God, remember the hour of their death and enrich their souls betimes with faith, prayer, and acts of charity."

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St. Anthony the Great, the patriarch and father of monastics, said: "Reflect within yourself and say: 'I shall not remain in this world longer than today', and you never sin against God."

St. Nicolai adds: "There is nothing more light-minded than to say: 'Let me die suddenly, so that I may not feel my death!' Thus speak the foolish and godless. The wise and devout say: 'May God's will be done!' Better to be sick for years and to have growths and cramps from our sickness than to die unprepared and unrepentant. The pains of this world quickly pass, as do its joys. In the other world, though, there is nothing ephemeral and transitory, but all is eternal, whether torment or joy. It is therefore better to suffer a little here than there..."

In this way we see how much the Savior loved us, that He continued to teach his disciples and, by extension, us, gathered here this morning, how to live and also how to die or, rather, how to prepare for death. So much of what Christ taught concerned this very question: "How then should we live?" This is why the New Testament is often referred to as a User's Manual, a guidebook to life, as well as a source of doctrine and early Church History. Yet how few know these holy pages and sacred words today! Some few, who attend church, hear the words of the Gospel on a Sunday and then quickly forget them before they even leave the church building. But they at least "heard" the words of Scripture--and, be assured, they will be accountable for what they heard, whether or not they remembered or acted upon what they heard. But for every individual who attends a church of some kind and hears Scripture read and preached upon once a week, there are tens, perhaps hundreds of thousands more who do not attend church at all and never read the Bible. In fact, there are now more and more homes that do not even have a Bible on the shelf.

This last week was the 400th anniversary of the publication of the King James Bible. This was not the first translation of the Bible into English but it was the most important one. For the next few centuries it was the primary "vessel" or "carrier" of scriptural truth for English speaking believers of all kinds. In the last couple of generations, however, the King James translation has been superseded by many new, modern and even modernist, "relevant" and innovative translations, some of which actually distort Gospel truth or are not otherwise faithful to the early Christian understanding of Scripture. Yet even few of these translations are studied now, as we slip further and further away from the great Christian civilization that used to be, and further into the darkness of the coming night of faithlessness and unbelief.

So, let us not be light minded and frivolous. Let us read our Scripture each day, ponder it, and ask the Holy Spirit to enlighten us how we may apply what we read to our lives. Let us begin with today's parable of the Foolish Rich Man, so that we might not be found, on our last day, numbered with his like.

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I leave you with these words this morning, from St. Luke, which can be applied to the darkness of our times: "But they constrained Him, saying, 'Abide with us: for it is toward evening, and the day is far spent.' And he went in to tarry with them." (Luke 24:29)

But then this, from the Psalms: "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning." (Psalm 30:5)

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.