

How do we measure success in life? If we are honest, probably in terms of what we have, and what we have managed to achieve through our own efforts. Did you hear about the woman who told her friend over lunch, how she had made her husband a millionaire – “Gosh!” said her friend, “and what was he before that?” She replied, “a billionaire!” Behind every successful man you'll find a woman who has nothing to wear.

Od Dear! I suppose I'll have to make my own dinner now?!

It is twenty centuries since the Prophet of Galilee denounced the worship of money as the major obstacle holding humanity back from a more humane coexistence. The reasoning of Jesus is clear: “You cannot serve God and money.” God cannot reign as the Father of all, if justice is denied to those who are excluded from a life of dignity.

We must see today's Gospel reading in the context of where it appears – as part of the sermon on The Mount where Jesus challenges his hearers (and us) with the different values of life in the Kingdom of God which includes the poor, the merciful, those who mourn. Life in the Kingdom includes our privilege and duty to bear light to the darkest parts of the world, to salt the world with mercy and justice.

People dominated by the passion to accumulate wealth, power, position and self-interest cannot build the humane world God wants, so long as they promote an economy that condemns the weakest to hunger and misery.

Pope Francis and others like him are often ridiculed by the media and internet social networks for their seemingly naïve positions on world affairs, but listen to what the Pope says about justice:

- “No! to an economy of exclusion and iniquity, for that kind of economy kills.”
- “How is it possible that the death from cold of an old man on the streets does not make news while the fall of two points of the stock market does? This is a shameful exclusion.”
- “It's intolerable that food is thrown out while there are people who go hungry. That is criminal and wrong!”

- (We seem to live) “in the dictatorship of a faceless economy without a genuinely human purpose.” As a result, “while the profits of a few grow exponentially, the majority remain increasingly far from the wellbeing of that happy few.”

The cult of personal prosperity and wellbeing leads us to ignore the needs of others, and we grow impatient if the market offers something we haven't yet bought, while all too many lives are stunted and cut short for want of resources. Each of us needs to ask ourselves: What am I doing, or what do I plan to do, to promote the Kingdom of God.

Jesus would reassure us: do not worry so much about material things and in the words of Julian of Norwich “all manner of things will be well.”

Of course, this would not be a practical principle to apply in business, or government, or the professions. Nobody doubts the need for prudence and for providing for the foreseeable needs of the future. However, just as important for our wellbeing is the kind of basic trust and optimism commended by Jesus. His words offer a radical antidote to being overburdened by caution and afraid of the risks of living.

People's fears are real enough. It seems that we are afraid of *something* all of the time and of everything some of the time. Many are afraid of failure, afraid of letting others down and of being let down ourselves by others. We may be afraid to love somebody because they might not love us; afraid of losing our jobs, our health, our security, our grip. We are afraid of growing old and of dying. Fear comes in a wide variety of forms, stress, doubt, tension, pressure, anxiety. It manifests itself in ways from a nervous tic to a nervous breakdown. Or as in my case walking through London, a tendency to look over my shoulder at every shadow in the street.

So we all of us have a lesson to learn from the great teacher of wisdom who said, “Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you-you of little faith?” A deep faith can put all our normal fears into healthy perspective.

We have to make a choice between the vision of life that Jesus offers or a preoccupation with ourselves. They are not compatible. They involve conflicting goals in life and different visions of what is most important in life. The truly materialistic, inward looking, person may have a veneer of Christian practice but cannot be a really committed Christian and vice versa.

St Ignatius Loyola called for an ‘indifference’ to material things. The attitude of ‘indifference’ is not that one does not care, but rather that one cares to have things and to use things only in so far as they are needed to love and serve God and others for his sake. Jesus urges us to liberate ourselves from worry and anxiety about ourselves – to be concerned for the present which the only place where God is to be found.

Worry and anxiety about the future are a waste of time and energy yet we indulge in them so much. We are invited to look at the birds of the air and the flowers in the field. They do nothing except be themselves and God takes care of them. And how beautiful they are! When their time comes they pass away.

I read a quote the other day

“Oh, I’ve had a lot of trouble in my life – but most of it never happened!”

We are often so busy regretting the past or worrying about the future that we never get to enjoy life. Enjoyment and happiness are only in the present. Nowhere else. If we keep looking forward or looking back we will never find happiness. And yet it is right here in our grasp at every moment of every day. Tony de Mello put it this way, “You have everything you need right now to be happy.” How our lives would be transformed if only we could really believe that! Because happiness can only be in the NOW. Yesterday’s happiness is gone; tomorrow’s does not exist. If I am not happy now, I never will be.

Jesus is staking a claim that God’s desire for us is that we all have enough. **We’ve** got to decide what our priorities and values are, and if we’re going to follow Jesus, then those priorities and values are probably not best

focused on ourselves. Jesus is saying, “Look beyond the boundaries of yourself, God is in the here and now and nowhere else. He is always available”

The well-off audience may hear all this as an admonishment to keep focused on the things that matter, rather than material wants - but try reading today’s Gospel to refugees who trek across deserts and hostile country to escape hunger or violence or both! They don’t have that option. If you have spent the last year or so worrying every minute about feeding your children, giving them shelter at night, and perhaps someday being able to get them some shoes, Jesus’ message cannot be easy to hear. What does he mean, don’t worry? Life is nothing but worry.

Though the message is going to be perceived differently by those who have enough and those who do not, the message is really the same: don’t spend your time and energy and heart fretting about this stuff. If you have enough, be thankful, and beware of making an idol of having what you want, rather than merely what you need. If you don’t have enough, it’s not because God doesn’t love you. Jesus is working to disabuse the common perception that those who please God have plenty; those who have displeased God will suffer.

Today’s gospel, taken out of context, sounds unrealistic to someone who is suffering. In the larger context of this entire teaching, however, Jesus is reminding his followers – and us – of God’s profound love for everything and everyone God has created, and encouraging his followers – and us – to focus on the kingdom of God.

Grace and mercy are available to all. For those who already have much, it may well be that God’s grace and mercy come through us on their way to those who are in the deepest need. What an awesome responsibility! And what an amazing joy – to be a conduit for the care and love of God for God’s people and God’s world.

With thanks to:  
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