18th Sunday C

**What shall I do?**

(A reflection by Fr. Alphonse Gollapalli)

There was a man who was a real miser, saved all his money. Just before he died, he said to his wife, “When I die, I want you put all my money in the casket with me. I want to take it with me to the next life.” His wife promised him to do so. Well, he died. He was stretched out in the casket, his wife was sitting there in black, and her friend was sitting next to her. When they finished the ceremony, just before the undertakers got ready to close the casket, the wife said, “Wait just a minute!” she came over with a box and put it in the casket. Then the undertakers locked the casket down, and they rolled it away. So her friend said, “Girl, I know you weren’t fool enough to put all that money in there with your husband.” The loyal wife replied, “Listen, I am a Christian, I can’t go back on my word. I promised him that I was going to put that money in that casket with him.” “You mean to tell me you really put all that money in the casket with him?” “I sure did,” said the wife. “I got all his money together, put it into my account and wrote him a check. If he can cash it, he can spend it.”

Fr. Ron Rolheiser in his reflection for this Sunday says riches can blind a person. He says, “The rich are worse in vision, eyesight. They have a congenital incapacity to see the poor. That’s why it’s hard, as Jesus said, for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. We understand this clearly in the famous gospel parable about the rich man who dines sumptuously every day while a poor man, Lazarus, sits under his table and eats the crumbs that fall there. The rich man dies and goes to Hades and, from there, he finally sees Lazarus—implying that he had never seen him before even though Lazarus had sat just a few feet away from him during his life.

Fr. Rolheiser says, “Jesus isn’t saying that wealth is bad. Nor is he saying that the poor are virtuous and the rich are not. Indeed the rich are often just as virtuous in their private lives as the poor. We sometimes naively glamorize poverty, but poverty isn’t beautiful. A lot of violence, crime, sexual irresponsibility, domestic breakdown, drug abuse, and ugliness of all kinds, happens on the poorer side of the tracks. The rich are no worse than the poor, in these things. That’s also why it’s hard for rich nations and rich individuals to reach across the great divide that separates us from the poor. In the United States, the richest nation in the world, one in every six children still falls below the poverty line. And worldwide, despite all the resources and goodwill on this planet, at least a billion people subsist on less than a dollar a day and thirty thousand children die every day from diseases that could easily be prevented by simply supplying clean drinking water. There’s a gap that we can’t find a way to cross.

We see—but we don’t see! We feel the poor—but we don’t really feel for them! We reach out—but we never reach across. The gap between the rich and poor is in fact widening, not narrowing. It’s widening worldwide, between nations, and it’s widening inside of virtually every culture. The rich are becoming richer and the poor are being left ever further behind. Almost all the economic boom of the last twenty years has sent its windfall straight to the top, benefiting those who already have the most. What Jesus asks of us is simply that we see the poor that we do not let affluence become a narcotic that knocks out our eyesight. Riches aren’t bad and poverty isn’t beautiful.” (*Currently, Father Rolheiser is serving as President of the Oblate School of Theology in San Antonio Texas.)*

Alexander the great, the Macedonian King, after conquering many kingdoms, was returning home. On the way, he fell ill and was dying. With death staring him in his face, Alexander realized how his conquests, his great army, his sharp sword and all his wealth were of no consequence. So, the mighty conqueror lay prostrate and pale, helplessly waiting to breathe his last. He called his generals and said, “I will depart from this world soon, I have three wishes, please carry them out without fail.” With tears flowing down their cheeks, the generals agreed to abide by their king’s last wishes.

“My first desire is that my physicians alone must carry my coffin. Secondly, I desire that when my coffin is being carried to the grave, the path leading to the graveyard be strewn with gold, silver and precious stones, which I have collected in my treasury. My third and last wish is that both my hands be kept dangling out of my coffin.” The people who had gathered there wondered at the king’s strange wishes. Alexander’s favorite general kissed his hand and pressed them to his heart. “O king, we assure you that your wishes will all be fulfilled. But tell us why do you make such strange wishes?”

At this Alexander took a deep breath and said: “I would like the world to know of the three lessons I have just learnt. 1) I want my physicians to carry my coffin because people should realize that no doctor could really cure anybody and cannot save a person from the clutches of death. So let not people take life for granted. 2) The second wish of strewing gold, silver and other riches on the way to the graveyard is to tell People that not even a fraction of gold will come with me. I spent all my life earning riches but cannot take anything with me. Let people realize that it is a sheer waste of time to chase wealth. 3) And about my third wish of having my hands dangling out of the coffin, I wish people to know that I came empty handed into this world and empty handed I go out of this world.”

Sometimes we don’t know what to do with what we have. And so use our treasure, time and talent in wrong way. The rich man in the gospel, whose land produced a bountiful harvest, asked himself, “What shall I do?” The problem with him is that he didn’t ask advice of others, nor did he ask God what to do with his treasure. He listened to his own voice.