

## October 11, 2015 Possessions Homily

My brothers and sisters, many years ago, I traveled to a Trappist monastery in Massachusetts, where I spent four days on my annual retreat. That week the retreat master was a brilliant young Jewish convert, Fr. Bernard, who gave one conference each of the four days to the retreatants. In the first conference, he made a startling confession. He informed us of a prior addiction in his life. I thought: was he addicted to drugs, alcohol, gambling, sex? None of the above! He was addicted to books!

He informed us that, over the years, he had amassed a large collection of books in his personal library, and was loathe to part with any of them. If someone made a request to borrow one of his books, he was reluctant to surrender the book, even for a short time. He was afraid that the book would never be returned. He was tied to his possessions. He came to realize that he could not take the next step in his spiritual pilgrimage unless he extricated himself from his books. As one of the retreatants, I was very embarrassed. I realized that I had the same addiction, and still do!

In our gospel reading, Our Lord calls a young man to a life of radical discipleship. It is clear that the young fellow is above reproach. An observant Jew, he has kept the commandments his entire life. He presents himself as one eager to learn! Spiritual dissatisfaction and yearning have brought him to Jesus. Our Lord shows his affection for the young fellow. The evangelist St. Mark tells us that Jesus loved him. "Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said to him, you are lacking one thing. Go, sell what you have and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me"(Mk.10:21).

The kingdom of heaven belongs to the "poor in spirit", the very group Jesus is hoping the young man will join by renouncing all his possessions. But Our Lord exposes a weakness. The young man is bound by his possessions. He finds his security and comfort in earthly wealth. He turns his back on the greatest offer God can make man: the gift of his friendship, the joy of sharing his company! He makes a terrible mistake. We are informed that "his face fell, and he went away said, for he had many possessions"(Mk.10:22).

There is a wonderful story told about the late C.S. Lewis, an Oxford don and Christian apologist. Once he was asked by a journalist if he expected to see any of the books in his vast library in the hereafter, Professor Lewis replied, "I expect to see only those books I gave away".

It is interesting to note that the young man in the gospel reading wishes "to acquire" or "have" eternal life. He conceives of eternal life as the crowning acquisition of his life of luxury. Is inheriting eternal life a business transaction? He fails to recognize the paradox of the Christian faith, namely, that it is by losing one's life that one gains it for all eternity. Only giving up what he values most, his possessions, can guarantee him a place in the kingdom. How difficult it is to squeeze through the gates of heaven with

unnecessary baggage! As one Trappist scholar put it, "It is crucial to see that Jesus is alarmingly, scandalously, asking us to renounce what we consider to be most central and vital to our identity as we have known and constructed it."

Do our possessions (smart phones, I-pads, golf clubs, etc.) become stumbling blocks in following Jesus? Has Jesus asked us to give up anything we are unwilling or unable to relinquish?

Do our possessions possess us? What do we give up for the sake of the kingdom?

Amen!