

August 4, 2013: The Wise and the Foolish

Brothers and sisters, if you appreciate Jewish humor, as I do, you'll likely admire the film work of Woody Allen. I have seen virtually all of his films, and have enjoyed them immensely. One film, in particular, comes to mind today. It is "Love and Death," his wonderful satire on Russian life in the early nineteenth century.

Allen plays the role of Boris, a social misfit whose odd views for his time make him stand out like a sore thumb. In one memorable scene, Boris is an improbable soldier in the Russian army. While on the battlefield, Boris is approached by a dead friend, Vladimir, who had just fallen in battle. Vladimir hands Boris an expensive engagement ring and explains that it was meant for his beloved whom he had planned to marry. Boris asks if he would like him to bring the ring to his betrothed. "Why Bother!" says Vladimir. "I'm dead! No! Return the ring to the jeweler and ask for the deposit. Once you have the deposit, go to Kiev and give it to Natasha Romonov. But make sure she hands you a receipt." "Why" asked Boris. "After all, you're dead". "For tax purposes" replied his dead friend.

Even in death, the friend of Boris is anxious, worried and fearful about his money and possessions. The anxieties of his earthly life crossed over to his shadowy life beyond the grave. He remained chained to the material things of life.

In our readings today we are offered three lessons on how to act wisely and avoid the pitfalls of making foolish choices. First, it is wise not to set one's heart on the goods of this world, for all material things return to dust and all our earthly treasures come to an end. In the Carmelite monastery in Schenectady, where I often celebrated Mass for the cloistered Sisters, you could see a sign once you entered the sacred place with the words inscribed by St. Teresa of Avila: "All things in this life are passing away. Only heaven lasts." Diamonds are not forever!

Secondly, nothing in this life can fully satisfy us. We cannot find our ultimate joy in the goods of this world. Inevitably, we become bored and look elsewhere for satisfaction. One recalls the mythical figure of King Midas. His one wish was granted, namely, that everything he touched turned to gold. In one version of the story, his food turned to gold, which left him hungry and desperate. His foolishness was the result of his selfish choice to be greedy and insensitive to the need of others. St. Augustine once wrote that our hearts are restless until they rest in God. Truly, a penetrating insight!

Thirdly, possessions and great wealth gives us the illusion of control. We find our security, our life insurance, in what is soon to perish. But the haunting words of God spoken to the fool in the parable serve as a wake-up call for all of us: "This night your life will be taken".

Fourthly, the great masters of the spiritual life have forewarned us that our attachment to our bank accounts and possessions can be a form of addiction and makes it more difficult to accept the hour of our death. The wise Saints embraced detachment, thereby freeing

them to spend more time in the Lord's presence and prepare for that moment in time when they are called home.

In his commentary on the Apostle's Creed, St. Thomas Aquinas offers us a brilliant insight on the article, "I believe in everlasting life". He says that the blessed in heaven will be given more than they wanted or hoped for in their earthy life. He further stated that God infinitely exceeds all other pleasures in life.

As we continue on our pilgrimage through life, let us ask ourselves if we are wise or foolish regarding the passing things in this life. Are we chained to all that is passing in our life? Are we truly free?

Amen