

EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (YEAR C)

July 31, 2022

Ecclesiastes 1:2; 2:21–23 • Colossians 3:1–5, 9–11 • Luke 12:13–21

I.

As you know,
the coats of arms of the bishops of Richmond adorn the walls of this cathedral.

There have been 13 bishops of Richmond,
but I could only ever locate 11 coats of arms.

Where were the missing two?

Then I realized that two coats of arms are on the ceiling:

That of Bp. Augustine van de Vyver,
who built the Cathedral,
is in the ceiling of the St. Joseph transept.

And the coat of arms of Bp. Andrew J. Brennan,
who presided over the Cathedral's 25th anniversary in 1931—
when the barrel vaults were completed—
is in the ceiling of the St. Vincent de Paul transept.

A bit of history about Augustine van de Vyver.

He was the sixth bishop of Richmond,
from 1889 to 1911.

Bp. Van de Vyver was from East Flanders, Belgium.

Without ever having been to the United States,
he became a seminarian for the Diocese of Richmond—a missionary.

He spent his priesthood ministering in Virginia
and the eastern panhandle of West Virginia.

During his tenure as bishop,
the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart was built and consecrated.

Later, a school for African Americans in Richmond
was named after Bp. Van de Vyver,
to honor his work among that population.

Several Cathedral parishioners are proud alumni of the Van de Vyver School.

Interestingly, Bp. Van de Vyver is interred at Mt. Calvary Cemetery,
not in the Cathedral crypt.

This is because as vicar general of the diocese,
Van de Vyver purchased the land for Mt. Calvary Cemetery
and asked to be buried there.

You can see his ornate sarcophagus in the priest section of the cemetery.

II.

Bp. Van de Vyver was a generous priest, a good bishop, and an important man.

Yet how many people know about him today?

How many people have even heard of him?

I mention this because it's a humbling and sobering truth:
Life moves on.

As Qoheleth, or the Preacher, declares in the First Reading,

“Vanity of vanities!
All things are vanity!
Here is one who has labored with wisdom and knowledge and skill,
and yet to another who has not labored over it,
he must leave property.”

Similarly, in the Gospel,
Christ teaches that,

“Though one may be rich,
one’s life does not consist of possessions.”

“Possessions” can also mean other measures of personal fulfillment,
such as professional accomplishments or academic success.

Those things end at death
and memory of the them inevitably fades.

This brutal fact points to a deeper truth:
there is more to life than success.

In the end,
what matters is who we **are** and not what we **do**.

How we act, including the use of our resources,
shapes who we are,
and this matters deeply to God.

In that regard, the parable is interesting.

Like most parables,
it has a twist.

The rich man appears to be acting prudently.

He has a large harvest,
so he increases his storage capacity.

It seems like a good move.

But the parable is a figure of speech;
it’s not meant to be taken literally.

The point of the story—and the surprise—
is that the rich man’s concerns are misplaced.

He doesn’t understand that there are more important things in life:

“God said to him,
‘You fool, this night your life will be demanded of you;
and the things you have prepared, to whom will they belong?’”

Sometimes, I think,
we miss deeper truths in life by focusing on what appears to be prudent.

Of course, there’s nothing wrong with prudence—
far from it.

Prudence is a virtue,
but it’s at the service of greater things.

So, we tend think that religion is generally a good thing.

We want to have God’s comfort and support when life gets difficult,
which it certainly does.

We say, correctly, that religion will give children a moral compass.

But we are, perhaps, less enthusiastic about holiness.

That can seem fanatical, unreasonable, and excessive.

In this paradigm,
sainthood is meant only for a certain, select group of people—
but not me.

And we would like for there to be more priests and religious sisters,
but we might be scared at the prospect of our own son or daughter’s
giving his or life in service to the Church.

Maybe that’s what trips up the rich man in the Gospel:

Beneath his seeming prudence,
he fears losing what he has amassed.

So, he hoards what he has.

God is very different.

He is generous with his abundance.

He sends his Son to die and be raised for our sins.

That's what's being renewed in each celebration of Mass.

And that's what shapes our lives, week in and week out.

St. Paul urges us in the Second Reading:

“If you were raised with Christ, seek what is above,
 where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.
 Think of what is above, not of what is on earth.”

A practical recommendation, then, for doing just that.

Most Catholics are surprised to know that each Friday,
 even outside of Lent,
 is a day of penance for the whole Church.

Each Catholic is encouraged to do some form of penance that day,
 preferably abstaining from meat,
 although another penance may be substituted
 (*Code of Canon Law*, canons 1250–1251;
Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 1438).

Penance is a concrete way to “seek what is above....
 not... what is on earth.”

III.

A final thought,
 this one about a couple known to Bp. Augustine van de Vyver.

Thomas Fortune Ryan (1851–1928) and his wife, Ida Mary Barry(1854–1917),
 singlehandedly financed the building of this Cathedral.

Plans to build a new Cathedral began in 1865,
 but there was never enough money.

Then, in 1901, the Ryans gave a donation of \$500,000 (today \$15 million), and the Cathedral was quickly built between 1903 and 1906.

Wealth, whether it be material or in some other form, can be used for great good.

This cathedral church is a testament to that truth.

And it is a testament to another truth:
Christ makes rich “in what matters to God.”

He gives us his own life so that we can live like him.