

Homily: Eighth Sunday after the Epiphany
(February 27, 2011)

In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

There is a great deal of competition for our time, loyalty, money and energy these days. There are incalculable people and things that seek to claim value enough to motivate and direct our attentions:

Marketing initiatives, political advertising, catalogues and magazines, store windows and entrepreneurs, ideological societies and televangelists. Your siblings, your school, your teachers and counsellors, college applications, university officers. Your job, your boss, your best friend's advice that you are definitely not wearing the latest trend and your mother – who claims you never call or visit.

So many demands. So many offers. So many claims of value. And for the most part, we buy into them, at least to a degree. No one is absolutely free from persuasion. Each of us feels the twinge and pull of vanity. We all have our vices and toys. We all have that thing which we thought we just had to have.

Thus we all need to hearken to Jesus' words from Matthew: "No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth. Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear? Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?"

Now, I know exactly how my teenage nieces would answer this question, especially as concerns the part about clothing. And as much as I love them, I must say when visiting I am more than slightly relieved I am not the parent of a teenager.

However, these questions posed by Our Lord are not rhetorical. They are serious questions demanding serious reflection and a likewise serious response. What is really being asked by Christ is, “What do you value?” Of all the things that bombard us every day for love and attention and loyalty and response, where does God fit? What place does God hold in the pyramid of your values?

Is the Lord the first thought upon rising or an afterthought at the end of the day? Is Christ at the forefront of your mind and actions – directing your mouth and hands throughout the stresses and activity of daily life – or does he struggle to be at most a backseat driver?

I suspect that for most of us, it holds true that when push comes to shove and the pressures of daily living become overwhelming, the first to go is God. By that I mean our attentions become so consumed with survival (an extremely powerful and natural human instinct) that we divert what’s left in the tank to their accomplishment and away from those practices and disciplines that not only foster our relationship with Christ and neighbour, but ironically re-fill our tanks. So we keep running on empty.

Think about the number of times you have reprimanded yourself for letting your attention become distracted during prayer – or worst yet letting the discipline slip to the point that you are setting aside little or no time at all in prayer.

We know that faith is about relationship and every relationship, if it is to grow needs the tender care of devoted hearts. But this is also the argument made by those matters peripheral to faith, but which nonetheless wiggle their way into our focus and take over. Of course relationships are also very hard work, so perhaps we invite the distractions that pull

our minds and hearts away from the journey of holiness and our calling to continually conform our lives to the image of Christ.

But succumbing to the temptations to be overwhelmed with other matters leads only to a fleeting peace. Filling the void within by focussing on worldly concerns does not relieve our anxiety and stress nor does it fill the emptiness we feel in the night. It is particularly at these times when we cannot escape the God who created us. Under the penetrating light of the dark, all of our true desires and yearnings rise up and demand to be addressed.

Because we are here this morning, because we care to have a stake in the parish; to involve ourselves means we have, like the saints who have come before, keenly felt the desire that leads to Christian faith and discipleship – a desire which cannot be ignored, cannot be bought or sold or held at bay for too long before it begins to overwhelm the soul. The desire of God for us mortals is one that can only be satiated with acceptance.

The words of St. Augustine of Hippo have resounded true in the souls of many throughout the centuries from the moment he uttered them until now: *Nos fecisti ad te et inquietum est cor nostrum donec requiescat in te*. “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”

What Augustine is saying, is that it is in Christ where our true peace and rest lie. It is in Christ where all of the world’s craziness makes sense and becomes bearable because it is Christ who can truly fulfill the needs of humanity – needs that run far deeper than the body and aesthetics. Therefore, paradoxically, by directing our full attention upon the relationship we have with God in Christ all else will work itself out.

It is because Christ has entered the fray with us that we can possibly heed his words to not worry about the daily needs of life, since he himself encountered those same needs and

revealed that faithful reliance upon God does not, in the end, disappoint though the immediate moment be clouded with worry and fear.

It is truly out of lived experience; a genuine embracing of mortal doubt and despair (“My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me” “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me”) that Christ can tell us not to worry.

And yet, Jesus is looking to something much deeper than food and clothing. He is offering a promise weightier than just that God will provide. He is in fact urging us to value what is truly valuable; to hold everything up to the light of the knowledge of God as revealed in the face of Christ and by that lens, judge what is worth our time, our effort, our resources, our loyalty and our dreams.

Jesus is telling us that we are more than how we look. We are more than what we eat. And God’s love and the relationship we have entered through faith are of more value to the body and the soul than can be measured. Thus, love each in proportion to each other.

What are you valuing? Where are we placing your priorities? Maybe you are spending your life on what is small in value: what you will eat, what you will wear, how long you will live. These things do not last. They are too far down the scale of worth. “But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”

Let tomorrow take care of itself, for it will bring with it enough worries of its own. And spending your life and health today on something you cannot predict or grasp will serve only to destroy any good that today has to offer. Besides, in the scale of value, God has told us and shown us that we are worth far more than the birds of the air and yet God feeds them and clothes them in beauty. What more will he do for his children for whom his Son died?

So despite everything that says otherwise, trust in God's love for you. Let it bathe you in hope. Let it nourish you in assurance for Our Lord wants nothing more than for his creatures to know joy in its fullness. If you don't believe me, than believe God's own words spoken through his prophet Isaiah: "Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you."