

## Week 18 – Ordinary Time – August 1, 2010

“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven. A time to be born, and a time to die, a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted, a time to kill, and a time to heal, a time to break down, and a time to build up.” If there’s one passage from the Book of Ecclesiastes that most everybody knows, it’s that one. Pete Seeger even set it to music, and in 1965 the Byrds released it as a single with the title “Turn! Turn! Turn!”

At Sunday mass, our lectionary arranges the most important excerpts from the bible in such a way that if you come each weekend for 3 years you will hear the best parts of all 72 books of the bible. At least, that’s the theory. For some reason, we hear only one passage from the entire Book of Ecclesiastes on Sundays, and today’s the day. But it’s not the lyrics to that popular song. Instead, we hear this: “All things are vanity!” You labor with your wisdom and knowledge and skill, and when you die, your property goes to somebody who did not labor over it. You spend your life in toil and anxiety of heart. You sweat under the sun. Your days are filled with sorrow and grief, and at night your mind does not rest. At the end of that reading, we all said, “Thanks be to God.”

Well, when we open the bible, we expect to get a lift. Not today. This message is as miserable as it gets. Today’s gospel offers no rescue: Jesus tells the parable of a rich man who needs bigger barns to store his huge harvest, so he can eat, drink and be merry for the rest of his life. But before he can enjoy anything, he dies. The end. “Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.” These are not cheerful readings. You can find happier thoughts in the works of Edgar Allen Poe. There is no cheer in the belief that we work hard, have little to show for it, and then die. That bleak picture would depress anyone unless your work contributes to society, or you know that your paycheck benefits the people you love. Then work can cheer you up.

The real worry concerns people whose jobs become more important than their family, their faith, their duty to their country, or some other cause that they really should live for. The word “workaholism” had not been invented in the days of the bible, but that’s the condition behind these readings. There is a time for everything, and people have control over where they spend it. Most people really do have time to do the things that they value, but not everybody uses that time wisely. We all get trapped in a cycle of activities that we do not stop often enough to evaluate.

So, maybe, given our culture, the lectionary is right when it opens up the Book of Ecclesiastes for us, not to give us the obvious news that everything has a season, but a warning that our values may be misplaced. Just think back over one day; for example, yesterday. Think it through again. Did you spend yesterday doing things that really matter to you the most? Or was some of your time consumed in what the Book of Ecclesiastes thinks is fleeting and futile?

If you could live yesterday over again, what change would you make about how you used your time? Now, what will you do tomorrow?