

18th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C

Fr. Samuel Springuel

31 July, 2022

1st Reading Ecclesiastes 1:2;2:21–23

Responsorial Psalm Psalm 90:3–4,5–6,12–13,14 and 17

2nd Reading Colossians 3:1–5,9–11

Gospel Luke 12:13–21

This past week I got a new phone. My old phone had been acting up for a while: it would crash almost every morning like clockwork after using it for 15 minutes or so. The reported battery charge was unreliable, swinging wildly from nearly full to really low in the space of an hour, and then back up again after just 30 minutes of being plugged in. But despite these problems it had still worked, so I kept putting off the replacement. Sure, I had to carry around an extra battery pack and charging cable so that I could plug in at a moment's notice, but if you've seen the size of the pockets we have in our habits, you know those extras would fit without any problem, so to me it didn't seem like that big of an inconvenience.

What was inconvenient was when my old phone decided to die. I had just gotten to England for the General Chapter, about 3 weeks ago. I plugged the phone in to charge overnight on my first night, and awoke to it displaying the “critically low battery” icon on the screen. Instead of charging, the battery had completely drained overnight, and with an iPhone, that means I could not use it, even when it was plugged in. After borrowing someone else's charger at Chapter to confirm that the problem was my phone, I settled in to a couple of weeks enforced hiatus from technology. If someone wanted me to read a document at the meeting, it had to be on paper. I had to rely on Reception manually calling my room each morning to wake me up instead of my usual alarm clock. If I wanted to know the time, I had to find a wall clock or ask someone. I couldn't follow the news, and had to put my headphones aside and listen to what was going on around me instead of the podcasts I would usually have running in the background when I went for a walk. It was the kind of experience which makes you realize just how much you've come to depend on technology, but also how you really don't actually need that technology. I was probably more fully present for General Chapter than I'd been for any two week meeting I've ever been to.

Once I got home, however, I did have to replace the phone and the process of doing so was an interesting juxtaposition with today's readings. I kind of knew already which model phone I wanted, but invariably when you shop for a new phone, you're presented with a list of the “latest and greatest” models. The ones with all the bells and whistles that the companies who make these phones think you want, and try to convince you that you need. Phones with 4 camera

lenses, that you can unlock just by looking at them, with screens big enough to compete with TVs from the 1950s. Faster, bigger, brighter, smarter, whatever. They will try to sell you on just about everything and anything when it comes to a new phone.

But as today's readings remind us, more is not necessarily better, or even good. It is so easy to get caught up in the rat race of keeping-up-with-the-Joneses, that we can lose sight of what really matters. A new phone, no matter the model, no matter what features it comes with, will not get me into heaven. It won't improve my relationships. It won't make me a better person. I might use it when doing certain things which will help me towards those goals, but for every one of those activities, there is a non-technological, sometimes downright primitive, way of doing the same thing. Instead of birthday reminders, I could just write people's birthdays down on the calendar hanging in my room. For every picture I take with the phone's camera, I could spend more time simply enjoying what I'm looking at and fixing it in my memory so that I can describe it to other people. Instead of emails, texts, and phone calls to stay in touch with people, I could visit them if they're close by, or send them letters if they are not. Having a phone, at most, makes some things more convenient, and convenience is not a virtue. It can facilitate the development of virtues, but it can equally facilitate the development of vices as when, for example, I put on headphones and allow listening to podcasts or music to cut me off from the people right in front of me in favor of a less demanding "relationship" with the voices of people I've never met.

For those of us who don't live in an agrarian society, our phones, or any one of our other possessions for that matter, can be that "bountiful harvest" which faces the rich man with a dilemma in Jesus's parable. When faced with an equivalent dilemma, what will we do? Will we allow the bounty to be our downfall, or the opportunity to open up to others, to be charitable, generous even, and share that bounty with them so that the Kingdom of Heaven may be built here on earth?

In the end, I did go a little bit beyond what was strictly necessary when replacing my phone. I got an economic iPhone SE, just as I had planned, but because this year's model was being offered for the same price as the one from two years ago, I did get the latest version, instead of the out-dated one I had originally intended to get. I hope that by going with the more recent version, I'm able to extend the life of the phone for an extra couple of years before I'll have to replace it again, and at least in this instance, it's not costing the Abbey anything extra to do so. But is that just a rationalization? I'm mindful that simply the ability to replace my phone whenever I need to is a luxury, a bountiful harvest, that I should not take for granted. As one privileged to live amongst riches, with ample resources at my disposal, I always need to keep in mind that my life may be demanded of me without any notice and the resources which surround me, this new phone included, will be left behind when that demand is made. There is no cell reception, no Internet, in heaven. If I have not used this new phone to build up the Kingdom of Heaven here on Earth, to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, visit the sick and imprisoned, counsel the doubtful, instruct the ignorant, comfort the sorrowful, pray for the living and the dead, and all of those other things which we are called to do as children of God, then it will matter not what model it is, nor how much I spent on it. A new phone is not the new self, and it is only the new self, the self who has died with Christ and now lives in him, that will get into heaven.