

PRIORITIES

Trinity 7 - 03.08.2025

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2:18-23 | Psalm 49:1-12 | Colossians 3:1-11 | Luke 12:13-21

READING

Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." But he said to him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" And he said to them, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." Then he told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."¹

PRAYER

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. **Amen.**

1 Luke 12:13-21

SERMON

I. "LA DOLCE VITA" AND LADY POVERTY

Good Morning. Buongiorno. Dear friends in Christ,

As some of you may know, I have a special affection for Italy and I go there several times a year. That is of course one of the reasons that I visited Assisi prior to the Christ Church pilgrimage in May. However, I learnt a little bit more about St Francis and St Clare's lives this time, and I was impressed by a few other things compared to my last trip.

The beautiful mediaeval city of Assisi is situated in the heart of Umbria. It is indeed the green heart of Italy. It has an interesting and lengthy history, wonderful food, and a beautiful scenery with rolling green hills. There are several of the most beautiful pieces of art in this little, charming city. Giotto, a famous painter of the 14th century, created amazing frescoes at the Basilica of Saint Francis. Assisi offers a genuine taste of "la dolce vita," or the Italian way of life. This refers to a very specific manner of life that values modest everyday pleasures and a slower pace of life. A way of life that emphasises spending time with loved ones, enjoying meals, and participating in social events like passeggiata (a walk) and aperitivo. This is perhaps an idyllic idea that captivates in particular those looking at Italy from afar.² But Umbria is truly a gorgeous area of the planet. And Assisi is a lovely place to visit, with people having a good time.

On the other hand, in the 13th century St Francis and St Clare chose to live in extreme poverty and simplicity in Assisi. Being the son of a wealthy family, Francis aspired to become a knight in order to gain honour and distinction. However, he realised during his conversion experience that he was called to a different kind of knighthood. In a poetic fashion, he chose to live in holy poverty by serving, like a knight, Lady Poverty and following Christ along the path of the cross.

Viewing the sites of Clare's death in Assisi and Francis's receiving of the stigmata—the signs of Christ's crucifixion—on La Verna, a mountain in Tuscany's woodlands, was for me undoubtedly eye-opening and challenging. Literally, they had nothing. On pure stone, they

² Cf. <https://www.eatandwalkitaly.it/the-italian-dolce-vita-what-does-it-mean/?srsltid=AfmBOopOFBV3NJ0gSmu-rWreMDfTh0qUI1xG0PPRRpa85b1kRrmJrQa2>

slept. Before he passed away, Francis even requested to be placed down on the ground and stripped naked. He wanted to go out of this world like he came into it, without possessions.

Francis had to deal with the contradictions of his family's lavish lifestyle and the great poverty of some segments of the city's people. It is notable that his given names reflect this as well. Following his birth, his mother named him Giovanni in honour of John the Baptist, who lived in the desert and ate honey and locusts. However, his father, who was travelling when he was born, gave him the new name Francesco, which translates to "the French." In fact, his father really enjoyed the opulent French way of life at the time. In the deep of his heart, however, Francis was probably more like John the Baptist—a prophet who exhorts people to turn from their sins. But, by the way, Francis also led an expensive lifestyle and enjoyed throwing parties with his buddies when he was younger.

Despite the beauty of the Umbrian landscape and the expanding prosperity of their families, Francis and Clare nevertheless question their priorities after their conversion. They ask: what is actually valuable in God's eyes? This question persists even generations after they died.

II. THE DANGER OF COMFORT

Why is all of this still important, you might wonder? In Vienna, and in our region of the world, I suppose the majority of us lead fairly good and sometimes quite comfortable lives. I say "most of us" because I have even witnessed individuals in Christ Church who seek assistance, as well as members and guests of our congregation who occasionally find themselves in challenging circumstances.

It is important to say that in the past, things were different in Europe. We may and should be quite appreciative of the last century's accomplishments, especially those related to worker rights and poverty. However, poverty still persists and is seen within this world. Global wars and migration are unmistakable signs that people aspire to improve their lot in life. They are searching for solutions to injustice and poverty. On this globe, there are tensions and sometimes large disparities between severe poverty and extreme luxury.

Although the position of individuals in extreme poverty has improved, worldwide, it is still true that a small fraction of the world's residents own and consume the vast bulk of its goods. In Vienna, many people do not face extreme poverty, which might lead to a lack of awareness of the needs of other parts of the world, which may be right next door.

III. OVERCOMING GREED

In contrast, Luke's gospel reveals that Jesus' core mission statement is in line with helping those in need. Luke depicts Jesus as quoting a scripture from the prophet Isaiah immediately at the start of his ministry: *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."*³

Today's gospel reading according to Luke and the lives of Saints such as Francis and Clare challenge us in an age marked by vast inequities in the allocation of wealth. Luke reminds us about our priorities, saying, *"Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."*⁴

Greed is the crucial word here. And in today's Letter to the Colossians, Paul is much harsher, saying that greed is idolatry.⁵ In reality, idolatry is defined as placing material things above God. It signifies disobeying God's commands. It implies to put God second. According to Paul, greed distorts priorities.

Greed refers to the refusal to respect the integrity of other creatures, as well as the impulse to mistreat goods or people. It manifests itself in the excessive amassing of material possessions.

Greed involves pursuing power at the expense of moral law, prioritising self or family, using others for comfort, ignoring prejudice, failing to pay fair wages, wasting resources, enjoying wealth for its own sake, and lacking gratitude.⁶

3 Luke 4:18-19

4 Luke 12:15

5 Colossians 3:5

With regard to some aspects of today's politics of good deals, does this ring familiar? But let's not only point fingers at others. Perhaps it sounds familiar since greed reflects a characteristic of our human nature that can and does cause significant harm. Therefore, the gospel invites us to overcome greed. And there is an antidote to greed: generosity. Generosity triumphs over greed.

When Jesus says a few verses after today's gospel reading, "*Sell your possessions and give alms,*" he invites us to reset our priorities in terms of goods and not worry too much about our possessions. "*Make purses for yourselves that will not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief gets close and no moth destroys.*"⁷

IV. GOD IS THE SOURCE OF LIFE

Being generous means confessing with our hearts, minds, and acts that God is the source of life. God is the provider of all good things. According to today's gospel, God's kingdom is the most important perspective. God's Kingdom gives an abundance of peace, justice, and life. Nothing we can do or acquire can extend our life on Earth. Nothing we have in this life or beyond is the result of our own efforts. Everything is a gift of the grace and kindness of God. God is generous.

Seeing the generosity of God was the cause of the most profound joy for St Francis and St Clare. They witness that salvation is due to Christ's incarnation, cross, and resurrection. Even if Francis' and Clare's self-chosen poverty appears severe to us today, they confessed through their life that God is the provider of everything, and that God may be experienced even in the deepest infirmity. Because salvation is based on God's goodness rather than human effort. Accordingly, St Francis prayed, "You are three and one, the Lord God of gods; You are the good, all good, the highest good, Lord God living and true."⁸

6 Cf. Cobb, David / Olsen Derek: *Saint Augustin's Prayer Book, A Book of Devotions, Revised Edition*, 2014, p. 127-129

7 Luke 12:33

8 Cf. <https://ofm.org/en/prayers.html>

V. BE THANKFUL AND DON'T FORGET THE POOR

If you expect me to propose that you live now like Francis and Clare, I must disappoint you. That would have been way too easy. One of the benefits of the journey to Assisi for me this year was a better understanding of the context of the 13th century Italy. I suppose most of us in today's world, especially in Europe, can't live like Francis and Clare did. But the question they asked with their lives in accordance with the gospel remains: How should a life look like if God's kingdom comes first? And what does that require with regard to all our possessions?

As followers of Christ and as a congregation, we must develop answers, consistent with Jesus's mission statement, taking into account the circumstances of today's world. This is the ongoing challenge that comes with following Christ. And offering answers requires continual discernment. Sometimes we may have to reconsider our ways of life, and sometimes correction is required along the path. And if we make mistakes along the road, we may start over each day. This is possible because salvation is based on God's mercy and kindness, rather than human merit.

On these grounds our responses should be based on gratitude for God's gifts and care for the needs of the people around us and in the world. One approved method to remind ourselves to be appreciative and not forget the needs of others is to say the grace before eating. Isn't that a wonderful practical approach to regularly reflect on our priorities and cultivate a grateful and caring mindset concerning others?

Let us pray!

For food in a world where many walk in hunger; For faith in a world where many walk in fear; For friends in a world where many walk alone; We give you thanks, O Lord.⁹ **Amen**

9 <https://www.xavier.edu/jesuitresource/online-resources/prayer-index/mealtime-prayers>

SUMMARY

The sermon considers the lives of St Francis and St Clare, who sacrificed their wealth to live in radical simplicity and serve Christ. Their example challenges our comfort-driven culture of today and challenges us to reevaluate our priorities. According to the Gospel of Luke, Jesus' mission is to spread the gospel to the underprivileged and to caution against greed by teaching that material belongings shouldn't be our top priority. In his letter to the Colossians, Paul describes greed as idolatry, illustrating how it distorts our priorities. Christians are called to be giving and thankful and to put their faith in God and to put His kingdom first.

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