

‘This very night the demand will be made for your soul.’
Take more heed of the Gospel than riches

Preparation: Bible, open and surrounded by images of luxury items (villas, clothes, cars, money) and obituary notices in the local newspapers with the phrase: ‘We belong to God and we return to him.’

Welcome and Opening Hymn:

Thank you for your faithful attendance. It is encouraging for us all and makes our group united and attached to the Word of God. On that point, let us now share rapidly on our decision of the past month to assess in what way Jesus has changed our behaviour.

Let us thank God for what he has been able to do and let us sing to restore our courage in faith, since to sing is to pray twice. Hymn on the theme of sharing riches.

Prayer¹ : *Father, we come before you truly needful. Since we have all lost loved ones, we can measure the solitude and desolation felt by your Son on the cross. Father, we come before you trusting wholly in you. Jesus lived knowing that he was to meet you face-to-face and he wanted to prepare us so that his message changes our lives and directs our desires. Through Christ Our Lord. Amen.*

1- Let us examine our lives as they are:

- *What do you think of the symbols displayed on the table?*
- *Is making the best of life wrong? Is our religion as sad as that?*
- *In obituaries in Algerian newspapers, we always read, ‘We belong to God and we return to him.’ How do you understand this statement?*

2- Sung Acclamation of the Word of God. Gospel Reading: Lk 12: 13-21. It will be read twice in dialogue (narrator, man, Jesus, the rich man, God), leaving a moment of silence between the two readings.

Deepen the meaning of the reading:

Saint Luke, witness to the blatant inequalities of his time, is the Evangelist the most sensitive to issues related to riches and poverty, (Lk 6: 24-26). For Luke, greater and smaller ‘riches’ risk hindering us from taking the Gospel to heart. Indeed, we could even use Jesus to justify our accessing a fortune (v.13) in good conscience or be so taken up with our ‘affairs’ that we are at the service of our wealth and blinded by it - (cf. the rich young man)!

- *‘Human life does not depend on wealth’, says Jesus. On what does it depend?*
- *In the plans of the rich farmer (v.18-19) the poor, others, are absent. Who is the focus of his concerns?*
- *‘To be rich in the eyes of God’² – how do we do that?*

¹ Ideally, it should be spontaneous!

² Other translations: “according to God”; “with God in view”.

Repeat Sung Acclamation of the Word of God.

3- Prayer: In **Psalm 49**, we find a prayer on the link between the poor, the rich and the end of life. Let us pray it in two choirs:

Hear this, all nations; pay attention all who live on earth, important people, and ordinary people, rich and poor alike!

Why should I be afraid in evil times, when malice dogs my steps and hems me in, of men who trust in their wealth and boast of the profusion of their riches?

But man could never redeem himself or pay his ransom to God: it costs so much to redeem his life, it is beyond him;

How then could he live on for ever and never see the Pit - when all the time he sees that wise men die, that foolish and stupid perish both alike, and leave their fortunes to others.

Their tombs are their eternal home, their lasting residence, though they owned estates that bore their names.

Man when he prospers forfeits intelligence: he is one with the cattle doomed to slaughter.

So on they go with their self-assurance, with men to run after them when they raise their voice.

Like sheep to be penned in Sheol, Death will herd them to pasture and the upright will have the better of them. Dawn will come and then the show they made will disappear, Sheol the home for them!

But God will redeem my life from the grasp of Sheol, and will receive me. Do not be afraid when a man grows rich, when the glory of his House increases;

When he dies he can take nothing with him, his glory cannot follow him down. The soul he made so happy while he lived - 'look after yourself and men will praise you'

He will join the company of his ancestors who will never see the light of day again. Man in his prosperity forfeits intelligence: he is one with the cattle doomed to slaughter.

Glory be to the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit both now and forever, Amen.

4- Putting the Word of God into practice. 'Succeeding in life and making a success of one's life' is not the same thing!' Jesus warns us against avarice (v. 15) which prevents us from seeing our life and death within the plan of God. Let us seek the means to live the message of this Biblical text:

- *In our summer plans, what room is there for others?*
- *What are the social implications of my (future) career?*
- *How do we live a simple lifestyle?*
- *What happened to my good Lenten resolutions?*

The meeting should not finish without having taken clear decisions.

Prepare the next meeting: It will be our last meeting and everyone should bring some food or drinks for the final celebration. We will try to invite **one** person who would be of interest for the Bible sharing.

Final Hymn in the line of sharing, rich-poor fraternity, living in God...

MOVING AHEAD

Some other ideas :

a- Think of associations with which we can associate: Caritas, Red Crescent, Ramadan Meals, etc.

b- Gather information on the budget of our Church in relation to supporting and sharing with the poor.

c- Read one of the following texts and discuss.

Riches, a trial for the believer

by Ghaleb Bencheikh³

From <http://www.revue-quartmonde.org> N° 208

‘Money doesn’t make you happy’.

Are riches welcome?

Can money be honest?

How can we live the love of God?

‘Money doesn’t make you happy’.

This is what the old English adage taught, even if for some happiness is good fortune in all senses of the word. Man seeks happiness, but most often realises that it is certainly not in material abundance that is necessarily linked to the idea of happiness.

On this subject, and as an anecdote, it is said that the Abbassid Caliph al Ma’mûn (813-833), son of Haroun al-Rachid, had a concept of happiness, which according to him was not at all based on money. Indeed, there is a famous episode in history which relates that one day the great Caliph asked his dinner guests to put forward their definition of happiness. The replies were the usual ones for courtiers: mostly a mixture of flattery, hypocrisy, toadyism and even duplicity, finishing up in the goods of this world and the vanities of the age. Then, some put forward the pursuit, much more honourable, of understanding and acquiring knowledge as the condition of happiness; others, playing on the sensitive strings of piety, proposed contemplation and meditation as a spiritual attitude. However, the reply of the rich and powerful al Ma’mûn was announcing quite simply that absolute happiness was to have a spouse whom you love and who loves you. *‘You have what you need to live for the day and you have no business with the Caliph!’* The first condition for happiness, according to the Commander of Believers, was therefore tenderness in the bond of matrimony and in the modesty of a humble life, far from the tumultuous commotion of the great city and its display of riches.

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In Islamic tradition, money is not a necessary condition for happiness. On the contrary, generosity will make someone much happier and bring a sense of satisfaction. It is very clear in the Koran that piety goes together with giving:

'Fear God as well you may, listen, obey and be magnanimous. This will be to your good. Moreover, those who abstain from their own avarice will be happy.'

Sura 64, the great loss, verse 16.

Just as in a context of religious belief, the notion of happiness is relative to conformity with divine guidance:

'Then, if even a guide comes to you from me, whoever follows my guide will never go wrong and will not be unhappy.'

Sura 20, ta ha, verse 123.

In his *'Pensées'*, Pascal expresses this same idea of happiness linked to faith, in another turn of phrase:

'All men seek happiness. It is the motive for every action of all men, even those who are going to hang themselves. Nevertheless, for a great number of years, no one without faith has ever reached this point that everyone is constantly aiming for.'

Do people approve of riches?

From a purely spiritual point of view, riches are more often seen as a trial than a good in themselves. Religiously speaking, a fortune is a kind of testing for a tycoon, as far as his radical attachment to the goods of this world is concerned. However, in truth, as long as riches are not an end in themselves, they are neutral. They are neither approved nor disapproved. Enrichment to undertake and develop investments in view of producing and making profitable his immediate environment and, over and above, his society in general, becomes a praiseworthy act. By contrast, amassing fortunes without re-capitalising them or re-injecting them into productive rotating funds is truly detestable. How many times has a magnate acted with arrogance? The behaviour of some tycoons in certain situations has slid them down the steep slope of tyranny. In Islamic tradition, the Koran draws the attention of believers to this behaviour in order to warn against its misconduct:

'Be warned! Truly, man becomes rebellious as soon as he thinks he can be self-sufficient due to his riches.' Sura 96, adherence, verses 6 & 7.

For this reason, the third pillar of religious worship in Islam is almsgiving, sometimes qualified by law. It is a curious adjective for a charitable act that should be spontaneous, left to the generous impulse of believers. In theory, this act should not be subject to legal obligation. However, in practice, almsgiving is a basic legal prescription in many Koranic injunctions. It stems from the law of God and is essentially orientated towards the divine, via the face of man here below. It is variously called *zakat*, or *sadaqa*, meaning both purification and growth, with notions of caution and even health-giving output in one case; it also signifies sincerity and accuracy in another. It lends

importance to the exercise of almsgiving in the religious life of believers. It is consistent with faith and goes together with piety.

Indeed, giving alms purifies the soul from the base animosity and vice of avarice so as to receive divine blessings through the benevolent action of the Prophet of God.

In reality, almsgiving goes back spiritually to the primordial nakedness of man who comes naked into this world and also leaves it, deprived of everything. He pursues riches in vain, amassing goods, laying up treasures; at best, he will only be managing what does not belong to him. He only enjoys the usufruct of what is God's. Therefore, he would be as well to give a share of it to those who are in need. In the perspective of a just distribution of wealth, the poor would receive what they are due from their Lord by the intervention of a believer, who rich and comfortably-off, is once again put to the test by his fortune! He has to shoulder his responsibilities in the City and contribute to the relief of suffering among his own kind.

Nevertheless, discretion is recommended. There should be no overt obligation placed on the needy recipient of zaka or reason to boast about it. Such conduct would be condemned. Whoever gives should do so with discretion.

Can money be honest?

Money should be honestly earned; like all goods, it should not be acquired dishonestly; otherwise, as the old saying goes, it will never benefit. After all the spiritual considerations previously put forward, there is nonetheless no reason for not seeking to earn money by notably improving one's situation and that of one's neighbours. However, in order to be a constructive element in the social and economic fabric of society, there is room to invest and make investments grow to everyone's benefit. If money does not smell, as Vespasian said, poverty does, and it is sometimes high. It is therefore legitimate to emerge from it. Human dignity among poor people must be respected as an absolute, but work needs to be done so that the state of poverty ceases to exist and that destitution comes to an end.

Besides extreme cases of genuine allergy to money in the conduct of ascetics, and of an agreed life of destitution, poverty is not an end in itself. When impoverishment descends, it is the duty of the poor to eliminate it. Naturally, legal and licit means have to be used to put an end to scarcity and penury. In that case, a justly salaried job, an honestly undertaken commerce and an activity seriously conducted are all worthy means of early an honourable wage and therefore emerging from a situation of constraints and deprivation in which poor people find themselves. In that context, there is no scruple whatever in receiving money honestly and duly earned. It is as though there were something shady and suspect about being rich. Without wishing to praise luxury, it seems odd to attempt to justify a consistent way of life. Uneasiness when faced with riches undermines relations between people. There is no reason whatever to raise problems with riches as such where there are none and where money has been duly and honestly earned.

Returning to almsgiving considered as a divine right on the rich for the poor. They receive it and spend it as an honest asset. Besides, the poor are not the only ones to receive alms. Indeed, the beneficiaries of zakat are specified in the Koran. Besides the poor and the needy, other categories are mentioned such as tax inspectors who work at collecting it. There are lawyers and jurisconsults who consequently decide on the

modalities of its settlement, in cash or in kind. Generally, the Muslim believer calculates his contribution every year. It is an amount deducted from what he could save for one revolution of a Hegira lunar year. It is equal to a quarter of a tenth of his savings.

How can we live the love of God?

For a believer, the love of God is the meaning of his great Passover on earth. Feelings of love aptly reflect attitudes in the human adventure here below. If he places God above all his passions and if he allows his love for God to triumph over all his other inclinations, then he truly loves God. Likewise, he truly has faith.

If the ordinary mortal does not feel friendship or love except for vulgar worldly profit, the believer who desires to have God's pleasure and divine satisfaction sets his sights higher, has higher aims, far from earthly pursuits. This is how the genuine believer is, whom God jealously protects, whom he loves and cherishes and to whose call he speeds.

It is taught in prophetic tradition that among the people God will protect with his shadow on the Day of Resurrection when there will no other shadow but his, *'Two beings who love one another in God, who thus unite and separate.'*

It is true that to love another, for the love of God is not easy and cannot be taken for granted. It is a subtle, fine, serious business that involves onerous duties. To love one's brother in God, implies firstly to allow him precedence, to consider him more deserving and to be ready to be held to ransom for him. It is to be his sincere and loyal counsellor, his advocate and the protector of his lineage, family, property and honour. It is to be worried about him in his absence, and call on him. All this is in view of one thing: God's pleasure.

To love for God's sake leads to putting the finishing touches to faith.

The love the believer bears his fellow brothers is pure and detached. He would like for them what he likes for himself, giving them priority. The Prophet reversed the famous Golden Rule: *'Do not do to others what you would not done to you.'* This becomes *'None of you can claim to be a believer unless he wants for his brother what he wants for himself.'*

However, this love must not mean complacency or complicity in evil or injustice. The best way to love someone in God is to be for him a mirror of the soul where he can observe his shortcomings and weaknesses. It is also to not let him wander into the twisted valleys of blind passion, to stand for Good and forbid him Evil.

When the believer loves his brother in God he must tell him, so that their love becomes reciprocal. The Prophet Muhammad showed his companions how to achieve mutual love in God:

'By the one who holds my soul in his hand! You will not enter Paradise until you are believers, and you will not be believers until you love one another! Shall I tell you something that will enable you to love one another if you do it? Begin by greeting one another well.'

Directness pleases God

by Hassan Tayyar and Hamid Douchement⁴

From <http://www.revue-quartmonde.org> N° 208

For the authors, religions can be stepping-stones or shrouds.

We are constantly fighting one another. We will succeed with the help of God and beating some carpets. Our relationship to God is quite uncomplicated and loving. We would have liked the little mosque ready, as well as the Oratory of Peace, but God is not in a hurry to see its roof. There are other priorities: job creation, education and training. The roof is a luxury for later and directness pleases God.

Does religion, do religions, help us in our campaign against poverty and in favour of peace?

NO. Unconsidered, interpreting their essence, religions were often the pretext to accept poverty as inevitable; they have been and still are too often a pretext for '*good works*' (pseudo zaka, pseudo charity) '*Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing*' (giving), because it would seem that what you are giving does not belong to you, it comes from God.

YES. Religions help us when they become the will-power to surmount poverty by developing education, training, working at job creation, accepting to be an instrument of the will of Allah, God, of the Most High, to triumph over our selfishness, over our fear of differences, to share. Our suffering due to poverty becomes prayer, a love that can move mountains, becoming an instrument of peace amid turmoil.

The rich as well as the poor are creatures of God and everyone must become an architect of peace.

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Religions can be stepping-stones or shrouds for peace. It is up to men to ask God not to be proud but accept to be an instrument. It is this state that will enable him to make progress against wind and tide in the unavoidable peaceful campaign against poverty.

Salaam, Pax, Shalom, Paix, Peace, to each and every man and woman by name.

Digital Footnotes:

1 The ‘Permanent Forum on extreme poverty in the world’ is a network of committed people who seek to develop friendship and understanding on the basis of what poor and very poor populations teach us. It is developed and conducted by the International ATD Fourth World Movement. Internet Site: www.atd-quartmonde.org