

## 28<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time Bb

I came across a certain traditional technique use by tribes in Africa on how to trap a monkey. What they use are just a whole coconut shell, some peanuts and a string. What they do is that they open a hole at one end of the coconut shell that is big enough to allow a monkey's hand to push inside. However, that hole is too small for a monkey to remove his hand when he makes a fist. They then firmly attached the string at the other end of the coconut to be tied to a tree. After that, they put roasted peanuts inside and then placed it along a monkey's trail. The monkey smells the peanuts and is attracted to them. He puts his hand through the hole and grabs a handful of peanuts, after which it is impossible for him to remove his hand since he is unwilling to let go of the peanuts. As long as the monkey keeps its grab on the peanuts, it is trapped. The only way the monkey could save its life is to let go of the peanuts and flee. This hunting system works well because it hardly occurs to the monkey that it cannot have both the peanuts and its freedom. Even when the monkey sees the trappers coming to capture it, it does not let go of the peanuts and run away but makes more frantic effort to take them with it. The system works because the monkey is entrapped by its own greed. We can imagine the monkey saying its last prayers as it sees the trappers coming. The monkey prayer would go something like this: "Save me, O God; please save me. Only do not ask me to let go of the peanuts." This may sound funny, but fact is, many of us have learnt to say the monkey prayer. A good example is the rich young man in today's gospel whose prayer probably was: "Give me eternal life, O Lord; only do not ask me to give up my wealth."

The young man claimed that, from his youth, he had observed all the commandments that Jesus mentioned, including the fourth commandment. His tragedy was that he loved "things" more than people. He was trapped by the idea that he could keep his possessions and still obtain God's mercy. He failed to realize the fact that his riches had built a wall between himself and God. In other words, his possessions "possessed" him. Even though the rich man had never killed, stolen, or committed adultery, he was breaking both the commandment forbidding idolatry and the one commanding love of neighbor. He worshiped his wealth more than God.

This is what is stopping him in fully embracing God in his life. As long as he cannot let go of the grab or the hold of possessions in his life, he cannot be free. He cannot find his true happiness in life.

This is why Jesus mentioned the illustration of the camel entering the eye of the needle. During the time of Jesus, there was in Jerusalem a back door in the city wall, which was a small, short, narrow gate that is used mostly by the locals called "the eye of the needle." When merchant comes to the city for business with their camel caravans full of goods, they had to strip their camels bare if they wanted to get in through this gate. They have to take off all supply packs, saddles, and the trade goods on the camel's back. It is only then that they could pass through the narrow gate – that's how their big camels can fit through the "needle's eye".

In our life, we could be like those merchants. We may still be loaded down with so many self-centered hopes, habits, and worries, that we are unable to enter into a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ because of these. We have to let go and strip ourselves of these burdens. It may not be riches -- it may be anger, holding grudges, alcohol, drugs, lust, apathy, lies, unfaithfulness, theft, or fraud. So let us invite God today into our lives and into our efforts to face and remove these obstacles that are holding us back. Let us free ourselves from these so that we may not go away sad like the rich young man in our gospel today. Amen.