

This hoard of yours, whose will it be? (Homily for OTC18 - 4 August 2019)

One book I will never tire of reading is *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry¹. It is a book that helps me recover so much of the wisdom of childhood. It restores my fascination with the world and helps put aside some of the sadness that comes the way of every single one of us, and smile again.

And I'm not alone in finding this story so inspirational. The great Brazilian philosopher and poet Rubem Alves is clearly a fan. For he references *The Little Prince* in a letter he penned for one of his grandchildren². Writing to the tiny Ana Carolina he enquires:

"The Little Prince... I forgot to ask if you [little child], on your long trip to this earth, came across him? What is he like? [I hear you ask] It's easy to [recognise him]. He lives on a miniscule asteroid, takes care of a rose, has a little lamb, and dies laughing whenever he thinks of grownups. He perceived only what we children perceive: that the grownups are all crazy. For example, he told me: if we tell the grownups our house is white, with red windows, with a flower garden and birds on the roof, they look at us, scared, as if we were from another world. Now, if we tell them that we live in a three hundred thousand dollar house, they smile and say: "O, what a beautiful house!"

[You see] grownups think the biggest and most expensive things are the best. They think joys and gods come in big packages. For instance, when they talk about God, they are thinking about something big, very big, terrifying, something the size of the universe... they don't understand that the joyful, the wonderful, the divine, is just here at the reach of our hands. The divine is a dew drop, a purple mulberry, the mockingbird's dance, a sunbeam on a cobweb, the colour of a lady-bug, a chocolate candy, a marble, a friend, a hit in a ball game, little things, priceless. Like you. You are very tiny, you are not worth very much on the market. But you are more marvellous than the whole universe. Because you have the power to give joy and to feel joy..."

I'll leave Rubem's letter there for now and return to it shortly. But perhaps I can set the scene by describing a pattern of life that most of us experience at least in part: As children we learn to play with the toys we are given and with those we improvise for ourselves. These things bring us great joy and help us develop practical and problem

¹ First published in Great Britain in 1945 by William Heinemann Limited, London.

² *Transparencies of Eternity*, Rubem Alves, Convivium Press 2010, Miami, Florida, USA. Pages 103-4.

solving skills, expand our imagination and so, equip us for life. As we enter our teenage years and our friends come for sleep-overs and the like, we may become a little embarrassed to have our toys and books on display so we hide them away even though we might still play with them when on our own. Then comes the day for us to leave home. We leave our toys behind; and, if we are lucky, our parents pack them away in the attic. Or perhaps they do another good thing and pass them on to other children or charity shops so that they can continue to do good.

Next thing is, we set up home with our sweetheart, and everything is just perfect. Lovely furniture, clean walls, full sets of crockery and cutlery. Until our own children come along with sticky hands to grease up the upholstery, draw pretty pictures on the walls, scuff the furniture etc... Our house stays in this kind of condition until they in their turn move away. At which point we take our opportunity to update everything in preparation for retirement... until the grandchildren appear and we find that their toys begin to invade our space...

Perhaps we can look at his phenomenon in the light of Jesus' parable about the rich man who has such a bumper harvest that he builds big new barns. Did you notice how he only has himself to talk to? He has cut himself off from any other source of comfort, inspiration or any outlet for generosity, he has fallen for the vanities described in the first reading and for the greed that Paul speaks about in his letter to the Colossians; even God is left out of the picture until he intervenes to remind the rich man of the futility of greed and selfishness. What a contrast this is with Rubem the grandad who gets his delight by anticipating the joy that awaits his grandchildren. Indeed, he is so keen for this to happen that he does something about it:

"You know, Ana Carolina, I'm building a house for my grandchildren: you, Mariana, Camila, and others who may be coming. In that house I'm placing all my things for children, all my toys. They are the only things I find worth keeping. There you will find spinning-tops, marbles, kites, kaleidoscopes, puzzles, dolls, marionettes, a world of useless things that have the power to make dreams, story books, poetry books, song books, picture books, little gardens, fountains, plants, bonsais, paintings, posters, CD's. This is my house, my legacy: a house of toys for you. Now that you have arrived, even before seeing your face I look at my toys and imagine you playing with them. This makes me happy. And who knows, even your parents and other grown-ups turned children, may join us."

The summer holidays are one of life's great opportunities to rediscover our childlike wonder, wisdom and joy. I hope you take every opportunity you can.