

I’d like everyone to open their wallet or purse and take out a bill of any denomination and turn it to the reverse of the face side. In the center appears the statement **“In God We Trust.”** I’d invite you to simply hold the bill you have in your hand throughout the remainder of today’s homily.

In my homily on the Feast of the Baptism of Jesus I referenced Alex Haley’s 1976 Pulitzer Prize winning novel “Roots.” It is the story of the author’s quest to discover his African American origins—his roots. I’d like to return to the concept of “roots” but in its organic sense. The root is the part of a plant, usually below the ground, which holds the plant in position and which draws water and nourishment from the soil and stores food. From the root emerges the stem, leaves and ultimately the fruit of the plant; its harvest.

Look at the bill you are holding. This weekend’s readings confront us with the fundamental question: in whom or what am I rooted? What is the “soil” that nourishes and sustains my life? The answer determines the attitudes, values, choices, and consequences of our life. Ultimately, it determines life’s “harvest”—here, and in eternity.

The prophet Jeremiah today gets right to the point: “cursed is the one who trusts in human beings, who seeks his strength in flesh (read the things of this world). . . . He is like a barren bush in the desert that enjoys no change of season, but stands in a lava waste, a salt and empty earth. Blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord, whose hope is the Lord. He is like a tree planted beside the waters that stretches out its roots to the stream; it fears not the heat when it comes, its leaves stay green; in the year of drought it shows no distress, but still bears fruit. (Jr. 17:5-8).

As a means of economic commerce the bill we are holding carries power—power to purchase goods and services; power to influence the lives of others; power to be self-sufficient. Lacking money is to be poor and powerless. No where does the Bible

condemn the possession of material wealth as such. In fact, it is seen as a blessing. However, while material wealth while good (and can do much good) can lead to the first and greatest of all sins—idolatry—setting some thing, person or myself as the ultimate good in life—in short “god..

Jesus in St. Luke’s version of the Beatitudes in today’s gospel (which many scripture scholars regard as the original version rather than St. Matthew’s more familiar rendering) holds up the poor, the hungry, the afflicted, and the persecuted as “blessed” not because these are good, desirable states (they’re not!) and condemns the well-fed, the materially well off, the popular and admired, (not because they are somehow inherently evil (they’re not!) **but** because being “rich” in a worldly way, sinking our roots in the soil of this life rather than being rooted in God, leads literally to a “dead end.” Perhaps this may be one reason the decision to put **“In God We Trust”** on our currency was made. It is a tangible reminder that our individual and national lives ought to be rooted in values bigger than ourselves, our possessions. They need to be rooted in God.

One need only look to the lives of people who, at one time, were “shakers and movers” in the world of politics, economics, entertainment, or sports; who had all the “toys”, and power money could buy; their roots sunk deep in this world and whose lives, often ending dramatically and tragically, were revealed as empty and lonely. Then there is Ben Nelson, a multi-talented, soon-to-be ordained Lutheran seminarian from Decorah. Ben worked among the poor in Haiti and was killed in last month’s earthquake. Ben’s love for God and love for the people he generously served brought hope and light to a part of the world where little of either is found. In twenty some years he lived a rich, full life; a life firmly rooted in a relationship with Jesus. As he lay dying amid the rubble of a collapsed building his rescuers heard singing a hymn of confidence in Christ. And then his voice went silent.

Look again at the bill in our hand and the inscription **“In God We Trust.”** What is our soil? Where have we sunk our roots? “Blessed are they who hope in the Lord.”