

Sermon – Sunday 4th August 2019 – 9.30 am

I wonder whether you ever have that feeling that you just can't win? The messages that we start to receive from quite a young age in our schools and colleges are that we should work hard. And part of the incentive is that we will get good jobs, be able to provide for ourselves and our families, and presumably in the fullness of time have also invested sufficient in a pension to keep us when we are no longer earning a wage. We are encouraged to be responsible and sensible; to think ahead. Recklessness and wastefulness definitely are not considered virtues.

And so, when we listen to this morning's gospel reading, we may indeed have that feeling that we can't win. It sounds as though the rich man is being sensible and cautious, providing for his future. And yet it seems that he will not live to see that future. While we all know that's a possibility, it's certainly a hard message to hear.

You may have noticed that, somewhat unusually, we have heard all three readings this morning. That is because I rather like their different perspectives. Early in our gospel reading, Jesus says: "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." Our lives do not consist in the abundance of possessions. It's an important point. And rather begs the question of what our lives *do* consist in. And that, I think, is where each of our readings helps us in rather different ways.

If you are not familiar with Ecclesiastes, it really is worth a glance. Throughout its twelve chapters we hear this constant refrain about vanity. The sense of that word translated as vanity is almost of a chasing after wind or vapour. It's really about futility or even fancifulness. And so it is that the preacher of Ecclesiastes decides that it really isn't worth seeking after wisdom because in becoming wiser, we increase our vexation and therefore our sorrow. Likewise it isn't worth working hard, because we don't enjoy our toil, and all that we gain through our work is passed on to those who come after us, regardless of whether they are wise or foolish.

There is no denying that the life described in Ecclesiastes feels like one of disillusionment. Indeed the preacher's main conclusion is that we may as well eat, drink and be merry. Everything else, it seems, is vanity. And yet Ecclesiastes is considered wisdom literature for a reason. Perhaps the best known reading is from Ecclesiastes 3: "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven: a time to be born, and a time to die..." You know how it goes. Perhaps we need to see beyond what might feel like disillusionment and recognise that the preacher is really talking about trust in God. What the preacher knows is that there is a great deal in life that is not within our control, and the best response is one of faith. To place our trust in God, rather than our own abilities.

If that is the wisdom of Ecclesiastes, we might find it quite hard to square with the words of St. Paul. Far from eat, drink and be merry, we hear instead, "Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry)." And he goes on, "you must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth." If Ecclesiastes feels excessively permissive, Paul's letter to the Christians in Colossae feels anything but.

And yet if we dig a little deeper, the core message of both the preacher and Paul is really quite similar. Paul's words are, "Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth."

While his list of expected behaviours is detailed, his desire is that the Colossians should live lives that recognise God at their centre. Paul often speaks of living “in Christ”, or of clothing ourselves with Christ. The point, once again, is that we should not seek to be masters of our own destiny, but rather to place Christ at the centre of our lives.

Which brings us back to the gospel reading, and the parable of the rich fool told by Jesus. What, I wonder, is the rich man’s folly? Listen carefully to the 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.”

How many times does the rich man refer to himself? The entire parable is a conversation that he has with himself alone. Did you notice that opening line, “the land of a rich man produced abundantly.” It’s the land that has produced – presumably with significant work from a number of labourers. And yet the rich man is oblivious. He takes no time to give thanks – to God or to his workers. And as he talks to himself, he has only one interest: providing for himself. It is as though no other human being exists for this man, let alone God. Can this really be described as a life at all?

Do you remember what Jesus said before telling the parable? “One’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” It seems that this man’s life consists in nothing else.

So we return to that question of what our lives *do* consist in.

I wanted us to hear all three readings, because I think each one helps us to answer that question. Sometimes our lives should indeed consist in eating, drinking and being merry. *Not* in drunkenness, debauchery and all the other things that St. Paul is fond of proscribing. But there are times when it really is worth being thankful. Recognising the beauty of the world; enjoying its fruits; placing our faith in God. Last weekend I spent a couple of hours with my friend and her two children. We spent an hour or so at a playground, with the children taking great pleasure in swinging on bars, climbing and sliding down poles. They then spent ten minutes splashing in a puddle. Sometimes we really can find joy in perfectly simple things.

One of the things children recognise that we sometimes find hard to accept is that we are not in control. That is not the same thing as saying that we have nothing to offer, because we surely do. And neither is it the same as saying that we don’t need to make use of our brains and the other gifts that we have been given.

But our life has been given to us as a gift. An unconditional gift. And because it is a gift given in love, the call to us is to live out of that love. That’s what the rich man forgot. That a life lived in love is a life with God at its centre, and other people all around. It sounds gloriously simple, and we all know it is anything but. Yet if we can only remember that our life consists in loving God and loving our neighbour, at least perhaps we will be starting from the right place.

Amen