

SERMON for Pentecost 8 – July 31st, 2022.

Readings: Ecclesiastes 1: 2, 12-14; 2: 18-23; Psalm 49: 1-12; Colossians 3: 1-11; Luke 12:13-21.

“Vanity of vanities! All is vanity!” [Ecclesiastes 1:2]

So says the writer of Ecclesiastes, a book we don't hear from very often! Tradition has it that the author was King Solomon, but whether that is correct or not has been lost in the mists of history. Besides the quote I started with, perhaps the best known verses from this book comes from chapter 3, the beautiful 'for everything there is a season'.

Whoever “the Teacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem” [Ecclesiastes 1:1] was, the author has a cynical view of human existence as he searches for the meaning of life.

A sad reflection of the sum of a person's life when all that can be said is:

I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind.
[Ecclesiastes 1:14]

And then echoes in chapter 2:

Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and again, all was vanity and a chasing after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun. [Ecclesiastes 2:11]

There is a story about a wealthy man who died and took two very large and obviously very heavy suitcases of gold with him up to the pearly gates. When St. Peter informed him that he could not bring anything with him into heaven, the man pleaded with him to make an exception. “I don't think that's possible,” St. Peter said, “but let's see what you've got.” The man opened the suitcases. St. Peter took one look and exclaimed, “You want to bring pavement into heaven?”¹ (You may remember, the book of Revelation tells us that the streets of the heavenly Jerusalem are paved with gold!)

“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.” [Luke 12: 20-21]

As far as I am aware, our Gospel reading this morning is the only instance in the entire Bible where God calls someone a “fool”.²

Matthew's version of this morning's Gospel, Jesus is recorded as saying:

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” [Matthew 6: 19-21]

“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

In the passage we have just heard, Jesus is asked to rule on a family dispute over an inheritance. This is not as strange as it may sound to us, because people of Jesus' day would often take their unsettled disputes to a respected rabbi for justice.³

Here, Jesus doesn't want to get involved in the dispute, but uses a parable to teach those who were around him about the right place of material possessions in their lives. For where your treasure is, is where your heart is ... where your focus is.

Where is your heart? What is it in your life that is your focus? Is it earning more money? Is it building bigger barns to store your wealth? Is it just getting by yourself, so that you can be available to help others? Is it a relationship with God which will fill you so you can go out and serve others?

Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Paul writing to the church in Colossae encourages them to: “set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth”. [Colossians 3: 2]

That is not meaning that we should be people who are so heavenly minded that we are no earthly use, as the saying goes, but are a people who are intent in spreading the Gospel, the good news about God.

Instead of being worried about what gender or sexual orientation, or ethnic background people are, be accepting of them. As Paul says, in Christ there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, slave and free and so on.

In Christ, before God, we are one and we are called into God’s service, to reach out to each other, to our communities, to the world beyond, in love, in acceptance, with encouragement, bringing peace and hope, sharing in Christ’s mission to “bring good news to the poor, ... to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free.” [Luke 4: 18]

In other words, to be God’s hands and feet and mouthpiece in this world today. It is all about getting our priorities right. Like the man in the parable, we don’t know how long we will walk this earth, whether there is a long life ahead of us, or whether we will be gone tomorrow.

In her reflection on today’s readings, Revd Sue writes:

While Jesus assures us of the abundant nature of God, he certainly is warning us of the foolishness, greed and folly of building bigger and bigger barns with our name above the door. If the nature of blessing is flow, movement from the creator to the creature and on to all creatures then whenever we put blessings in a barn instead of letting them flow through us, we are attempting to stifle the spirit of the living God.

As humans when we are anxious we tend to hold on tight to whatever we have – the love we already have, the money we have, the way of doing life that we have already mastered – but Jesus is telling his disciples that they are being sent out into a world which is unpredictable but abundant. It is such an anxiety testing moment – to cling to the little we have or let go of what we own and trust the world.⁴

Jesus isn’t saying that possessions in themselves are wrong, but it is what you do with them that matters. The problem is if you just hoard them, like the man in Jesus’ parable, rather, we are called to be open hearted with the good things we have, to, if you like, hold them lightly and most importantly, to get our relationship with God right.

Hopefully that way, we won’t take the author of Ecclesiastes’ cynical view of life – that all is vanity!

The Lord be with you. Amen.

Revd Sally Buckley
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:

1. John Sumwalt in his sermon *Rich Toward God* as posted on *midrash* in 2004.
2. Bill Adams in his sermon *Affluence not Affluenze* as posted on *gospeltalk* in 2001.
3. as explained by William Barclay in his *Daily Study Bible - The Gospel of Luke*.
4. Revd Sue Lodge Calvert, from her reflection *What is Wealth for?* posted on her website www.companionsontheway.com on July 27, 2022.