

Sermon, Peel Cathedral 31st July 2022

Readings: Ecc 1:2, 12-14; 2: 18-23; Luke 12: 13-21

I used to work for a part of a company that had about 20 employees. There was no dedicated Personnel Officer or HR person locally so if anyone had any problems they'd call in at the admin and finance office. I was dismayed to see a notice in large, thick block capital letters which read: **LIFE IS HARD THEN YOU DIE**. It was such a negative statement – hardly the message I'd want to receive if I'd gone in for advice or help. I think the writer of the book of Ecclesiastes might understand that sentiment. His book is a pretty challenging read!

Vanity of vanities – all is vanity! Or, in other translations the word vanity is replaced with meaningless, empty, futility, useless, nothing – and more! And perhaps some of us – maybe all of us? – have been at a place where that's felt true. What is the point of life? Why am I busting a gut on behalf of someone when they don't appreciate it? Why do I bother to do things that are boring? Who should I chose to benefit from my will? There's nobody that will use wisely whatever I have to leave!

It's surprising to find such sentiments in the Bible. So who was writing these words? As you can imagine, there's been a lot of discussion over the years and there still isn't total agreement. But many people accept that the book was written by Solomon, David's son, the king who asked God for wisdom - and demonstrated that wisdom in his reign, and to whom many proverbs are accredited. He was also very wealthy. But for all his wealth and wisdom, he didn't prepare his successor adequately and, after his death, the country split into two, with two kings.

Solomon certainly realised that the future, after his death, was uncertain. He contrasts the ephemeral nature of human life with the continuity of the earth. Some 3,000 years after Solomon, we too are aware of the brevity of our lives, but have the added burden of caring for our planet whose resources we are squandering.

But we are living in the Christian Era. Jesus has opened our eyes to look at the world differently. He encourages us to look at the beauty of wild flowers, rating them more highly than Solomon's sumptuous robes. He reminds us that the birds don't have store cupboards, but God provides for them. (Luke 12 25-24) He challenges us to think about working hard (Matt 5 41; Luke 10 7), and about how we value the labour of others (Matt 20 1-14). He reiterates the summary of the 10 commandments: to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, strength and mind – and to love our neighbour as ourselves (Mark 12:30).

Jesus found value in those that society didn't rate. He healed those who were sick of body and mind, he chose ordinary people to be his friends and associated with

money lenders and prostitutes. He calls us to carry on his work; and his words continue to challenge us today.

Take our Gospel reading. It's strange to think that two thousand years ago people were contesting wills. Someone in the crowd around Jesus was eaten up by the injustice – as he saw it – of his father's legacy. Having listened to Jesus's wise teachings, the man sought leverage to improve his situation. Many people today feel the same way. In 2020 nearly 200 wills were contested in the High Court in England and Wales, and thousands more at a lower level. When I lived in Essex one of my neighbours ran the corner shop, opening it every day – even for 2 hours on Christmas Day. It was a thriving business. He was one of 5 brothers. Their father died and my neighbour was not happy with the will. The five brothers fought through the courts. Most of the inheritance went to the lawyers and my neighbour even lost his shop. In my own family, one of my aunts excluded one of my cousins from her will, probably because she didn't approve of his unorthodox lifestyle. My cousin thought it was extremely unfair and that we should share our inheritance with him. He'd retired at 44 and had made his home abroad. Even his own siblings didn't feel the need to share. Family relationships suffered.

It's interesting to see Jesus's response to the man in the crowd. He begins by calling him "Friend", putting himself alongside him. Then he rejects the role of arbitrator, but goes on to use what has just happened as a key teaching point: **Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.**

That makes sense – at least in my head. During lockdown I was able to do some decluttering. But there's a long way to go! So many things – books that feel like old friends, craft materials for all those creative projects I'm going to do, gifts that have been thoughtfully chosen for me but now could probably be appreciated more by others, letters going back decades – not to mention photos.

And all the time we're being bamboozled by advertising, by social media, by attractive displays in shop windows, by seeing what friends and family have. We're persuaded that our TV screen isn't big enough, that we need the latest mobile phone, that our gardens need a make-over, that we need a new outfit for a wedding. Or on a lower level, those sweets placed by the checkout, T-shirts costing less than £2 each, reduced priced groceries. So our heart can over-rule our head.

It seems that many of us – and I include myself here – have a tendency to greed. And, although greed is listed as one of the seven deadly sins, I've rarely heard it condemned in the same way that adultery, or theft, killing or lying, envy, lust and even pride are. And I wonder if that's because greed is something that's closer to home. That we might be guilty of. That I am guilty of.

Jesus used the man's question to show how we can get so caught up with what we have – or don't have! – that we are in danger of losing everything. His story of the complacent farmer who rejoiced in his excellent harvest and made plans to retire and enjoy his wealth reminds us that our lives are indeed finite and that we have no idea how long we have to live. Have you ever confronted your mortality?

What is it that you most want to do or have in your remaining years? How real is the God-element in your life? If you found yourself at the Pearly Gates tonight, are you ready to meet your maker? Am I? Are there relationships that we need to heal? Are there affairs we need to put in order? I know I haven't got the energy to live every day as though it were my last, but it doesn't stop me from making preparations. I've thought about (but not enacted) enduring power of attorney. I've thought about who might wisely use any resources I leave behind and have updated my will.

It's good to think about these things and take action, but of course life is for living! And if, on considering the privilege and challenge of meeting God face to face, we realise the importance of helping others to be ready, then let's find ways of gently encouraging them to face the future. There are so many people who, like the writer of Ecclesiastes, are confused about the meaning of life. We have just sung: The touch of Christ has made us whole. What greater gift could we give to our family, friends and neighbours than introducing them to Christ so that they too can be made whole?

Amen

Rosemary Clarke, July 2022