

Reflection for Pentecost 8 by Rev'd Canon Michael Last

Someone in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me."

That request, posed to Jesus by the individual in the crowd in today's gospel reading, is one that can still be heard from time to time, today. Someone has sadly passed away and almost as soon as they have been laid to rest, infighting begins - who will get what?

On occasions I come across this sort of attitude while preparing for a funeral. What is often apparent is that it is not something new, but rather something that is deep-seated, a conflict that has been bubbling under the surface or even above it for many years. The situation just brings it onto focus as greed, covetousness and jealousy take over.

That is exactly the first point that Jesus makes in his response *'Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.'* Having a true awareness of the value of life enables us to put "things / possessions" in their proper place. It also means that we do not do what the person making the request to Jesus has just done; and that is pass judgement, pronouncing that an injustice is being done.

Jesus uses this question as an opportunity to underline what his ministry is about.

He has come to bring people to God, not to bring property to people. He is concerned far more with the attitude that has caused the question to be asked in the first place than, in practical terms, with who has what. What is the motivation, the attitude that caused this question to be asked in first place? That is what Jesus addresses.

In the parable that follows he issues a strong warning against all covetousness and every kind of greed, because what greed does is give us a wrong, a twisted perspective on life. It becomes, for many, a substitute for the proper purposes of life, which is the search for and the worship of God. As St. Paul in one of his letters reminds us - greed becomes an idol, it leads to idolatry, idolatry that destroys.

Before we look at the parable it may be worth reminding ourselves what a parable is - a story used to illustrate a moral or spiritual lesson. In the telling of the story, it is not uncommon for Jesus to amplify elements within the story in order to illustrate more strongly the point he is trying to make. Thus, in the parable Jesus is not directly attacking wealth or calling on Christians to live a life of poverty but rather asking about motive, what is the individuals priority. Thus he is asking about the most important thing.

As the parable opens, we have the image of a rich man who has worked hard. His crops have done well: so much so, that he has not got enough space to store it all. He has decisions to make and, using the information in front of him, he makes those decisions - he is looking ahead and planning for the future. So, he decides to pull down his barns and build bigger ones. Where things go astray though is what he says to himself. The Good New Bible graphically puts it like this - *"Lucky man! You have all the good things you need for many years. Take life easy, eat, drink, and enjoy yourself!"*

In making that statement the man has failed to take a number of things into account.

Firstly, he is showing how concerned he is only with himself. He has so much yet he is not concerned with serving God or helping other people, the poor or the needy. He is concerned

only to have a fuller, richer, life for himself. At the heart of that statement lies his own self-indulgence.

Secondly, the man thinks he is in control; he is sorted for years to come. There is a sense of assurance bordering on arrogance. What the man fails to take into account is the uncertainty of life itself. Who for example could have predicted 12 months ago that we would now be battling with inflation of 10% plus? Whether rich or poor, death comes to us all, and not always when we are ready or prepared; our life hangs by a thread and where is all that wealth then?

One of the things my mother would come out with from time to time was a saying that is very true *"The only certain thing in life is death."* The man in Jesus' parable had failed to take that saying into account. His feelings of security and of control were misplaced, everything would so quickly slip through his fingers.

The underlying message coming from this parable is that food, clothes, and other things are a necessary part of human life and as Luke goes on to say in verse 30 of Chapter 12, *"Your Father knows that you need these things."* But our main concern in life should not be the laying up of treasure here on earth – that was the mistake of the farmer - because that so often leads to greed and covetousness that destroys rather than build up. Rather, we should be looking to build up treasure in heaven, our primary concern should be our relationship with God.

Root our lives on the love and the grace of God, ordering our lives in a way where practical matters are dealt with but where they are ordered in such a way as not to get in the way of our spiritual life; where our worship of God and our love and concern for others is paramount. Then the richness we will find will be far greater than any number of barns full of earthly wealth.

Peter in the opening of his 2nd letter makes a similar point

"For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But if anyone does not have them, he is short-sighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins."

Peter will go on in the letter to expand on the idea that, while we live out the Christian life waiting for God to restore all things, there are two paths open to us – either to live a righteous life reflecting our divine calling, where our priorities are kingdom priorities, where we seek constantly to grow and become more like Christ and are fruitful in spiritual terms, or the alternative path that leads to falling back into our old sinful ways focused on self.

Peter in this exhortation strongly maintains the distinction between these two paths and encourages us to take the path of faith. The challenge for us today is which path are we taking? The path of faith, with all its struggles and pains that will ultimately lead to heavenly riches or the path of this world with 'I' at the center?

Jesus concluded his parable with these words *"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 towards God."