

Sunday 4th August

Ecclesiastes 1:2,12-14

Colossians 3:1-11

Luke 12:13-21

Many years ago in London I took the funeral service of a homeless man. The story, however, begins before the funeral. Two homeless people – Brendan and Patricia – often called at the vicarage for a sandwich, sometimes “to borrow” some money. I once (in a weaker moment) lent Brendan £1. A few days later there was a knock at the door and he returned the £1 to me – I was somewhat surprised as I thought I’d never see it again. The next week he was at the door again – you know that £1 – could I borrow it again. Anyway, back to the story I meant to be telling you. They were squatting in a basement flat up the road from the church. One day they came into church and asked me to go with them to the flat to see one of their friends – Patrick - who was not well. I am no doctor, but on seeing him it was clear that he had died. In fact he had died several hours before. As luck would have it we had an ordinand – a trainee vicar – who used to be a doctor working with us in the Parish at the time. Chris came along and agreed with my observation.

We contacted a funeral director and, over the next couple of days, I went with Brendan to register the death of his friend Patrick and go through all the other formalities. I learned something of his story; learned that he had a brother living and working just a few miles away; that he had other family members nearby and in Ireland. We did our best to contact them, but to no avail. They clearly wanted to have nothing to do with him. In death as in life.

I took the funeral service. There was just me, Brendan and Patricia. They had come with me in my car to the cemetery. We said some prayers, read some scripture and committed Patrick to God’s care, and then buried him in an unmarked local authority pauper’s grave.

Contrast Patrick’s funeral with the one I took last year in a church in a Parish not far from here. It was the funeral of a local businessman – a self made millionaire. The church was full – 200-300 people were present. A well known professional musician sang one of his songs; there were several moving tributes from family and friends, there were hymns and pieces of music. And

we said some prayers, read some scripture and committed him to God's care. He was then carried by family members and work colleagues to the graveside.

Two very different occasions. Two very different lives. But the same outcome. Someone was committed to God's care and the hope of eternal life. What was left behind were memories of who they were. And who is to say that Brendan and Patricia's memories of their friend and of the chaotic life they spent together were in any way inferior to that family's memories of the businessman.

And that's one of the things that Jesus is getting at in the story in our gospel reading today. We can spend our whole lives working for things that – in the end – will be of no value. Money, possessions, whatever. Whereas the things that are of lasting value are the traits of our characters, the things that flow from who we are. The apostle Paul wrote that the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

And this can be seen – I am sure - in our own experiences of tributes we may have heard at funerals. I have yet to hear someone say "George owned a Jaguar XJ6 and a Rolls Royce, he owned a large house in the leafier part of Solihull, his Rolex watch was his prize and joy, he always invested his money to get the best returns". Much more likely is the memory of love, happiness, shared experiences, family and support. Personality rather than possessions; warmth rather than wealth; stature rather than status.

The rich man in Jesus' story – and it's important to comment that the story is not saying wealth is wrong – the rich man in the story saw his wealth as his and his alone. Building bigger barns to store it and protect it. No thought of others, no indication of love or generosity or kindness. No inkling of sharing. Once we call things "our possessions" we give the game away. We possess them. They are ours. They are not to be shared and enjoyed by others. The trouble is, of course, that all too easily we find ourselves in the place where those things possess us. They take over our lives; they become the goal of everything; they rule us and direct us. The things we imagine we own in fact can have a stranglehold over us. And that is where things went wrong for the man in the story.

In the end the question posed of the rich man will be the question posed to us all "The things you have prepared. Whose will they be?"

The writer of Ecclesiastes is even more blunt than Jesus.

Vanity of vanities. All is vanity. Mere chasing after the wind. There is no gain we can make that lasts. We are all here today and gone tomorrow. All that we gain will melt away.

And Paul in the letter to the Colossians makes the same point. Set your mind on things that are above, not on things of the earth. Effectively he is saying - concentrate on the fruits of the spirit, not the desires of the flesh.

What then are the things that motivate you and drive you. What are the most important things in life? What are your key priorities?

These are questions we asked in the first session of the START course that has been running in the Parish over the past 3 or 4 weeks. People on the course said things like family, health, happiness, security, inner peace, friendships. Maybe you know other people who might have answered money, house, new car, gadgets, exotic holidays.

But what is Jesus saying, what is Paul saying.

Jesus always talks of our first priority as being to love God. The summary of the law is plain. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. And love your neighbour as yourself. The priority is love of God, and from this flows a love of neighbour and of self.

Of course there is nothing wrong with the man in Jesus' story celebrating that his land had produced; there is nothing wrong with enjoying the good things of life; there is nothing wrong with money IN ITSELF.

The danger, as we have said, is when these things take over. When the producing of more and more crops, when the enjoyment of the good things of life – such as holidays, cars, wine and food, when the build up of money becomes the driving force of our lives. When our possessions begin to possess us.

Only we ourselves can say what goes on in our own hearts. Only we ourselves know the truth about our priorities and our loves. Only we can say whether loving God is at the forefront of our desires, whether we are rich towards God or merely storing up treasures for ourselves..