

Most of us are old enough to remember our parents say: “Necessity is the mother of invention.” For the generation who grew up after the great depression of the thirties and the rationing of the Second World War, the great virtue was “waste not, want not.” Life then seemed to be one great salvage operation. There was a Jacob’s biscuit tin on every mantelpiece, where all sorts of bits and pieces were stored, like buttons and safety-pins and pieces of string. It was a holdall wherein was stored the wherewithal to repair the wear and tear of daily life. My father’s garage was always a treasure trove of boxes with every screw and washer imaginable. Hoarding then was a virtuous necessity rather than a vice. Garbage disposal was no problem then. Most things had disintegrated long before they got that far. Even the ashes from the fire were used in the garden to kill slugs and worms in the rhubarb patch. Clothes were patched and woollen socks were darned out of recognition and when they could no longer be worn they began life anew as dusters and mops. Toilet paper had not been invented then; yesterday’s newspaper served the purpose more than adequately. For those who came in the middle of families, most of their clothes were hand-me-downs. Sizes tended to be approximate rather than exact. Hems alternated between being “let down” or “turned up.”

Nowadays we are locked into a consumerist society and the era of the disposable. Cities and governments spend millions on the collection and disposal of waste. We have all seen harrowing pictures of children and families, foraging for survival in the public dumps of the world’s cities: a vivid illustration of the ever-widening gap between the “haves” and the “have-nots”, between our avarice and their destitution.

Governments and businesses vie with each other in promoting avarice in their citizens and customers. It is promoted like one of the civic virtues. The good of the economy depends upon it. The Lotto is a national craze. And lest we might suffer from tweaks of conscience occasionally, we are reassured by the list of hospitals and other charitable institutions and of course Team UK who benefit from our avariciousness. But avarice is one of the seven deadly sins, “deadly” because it spawns a host of other sins. No one who reads a newspaper can doubt that. Our media fills us with a litany of political scandals, envy and hate.

Deep in our human nature there is in all of us some streak of greed and covetousness, wanting to own things at all costs.

Perhaps greed is linked to a lack of love, and many people try to fill that void with all kinds of possessions and celebrity, and self-righteousness. There is ample evidence of this in today's world which surrounds us on every side with the clamour of the rat-race, an obsessive scramble to get up in the world by fair means or foul.

Human beings are greedy. Older bible translations use the word "covetous" instead of greedy. The two things are different: greed is wanting more than we need; covetousness is looking at what someone else has and wishing that we had what they have. There's nothing wrong with wanting and having a nice car or house or clothes, but there is something very wrong when we feel incomplete if we don't have all the things that we would like to have. Yet, our economy is largely based on creating in us the desire for things we don't want. Advertisers base their appeals on our insecurities. Drink this kind of soft drink! Use this deodorant! Buy this car! It will make you happy, attractive, fulfilled

But the message of Jesus calls us to moderate such self-seeking. In his parable he suggests that, at some time or other, each of us must face the question put to the Rich Fool who put all his energies into piling riches upon riches. The gospel is emphatic that a truly meaningful life cannot be achieved merely by heaping up material goods, power, opinion and control. The rich man in today's story thought that his future was secure, and that his existence was totally in his own hands. It must have come as quite a shock to him to be reminded that life on earth is God's to give and God's to take away.

"Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions!"

I'm reminded of the story of a rich young man who was driving his Rolls Royce on a mountain road when he lost control and his car went over a cliff. The young man was thrown clear but his left arm was severed in the process. He stumbled to his feet, stood at the top of the cliff looking down at the burning wreck of his car, and cried out, "My Rolls! My Rolls!" The driver of another car stopped to help and heard him crying out like this. He gently grabbed the man and said, "Sir! You're in shock. Your arm has been

severed! Let me help you. “The young man looked down and when he saw that his arm was gone he cried out, “My Rolex! My Rolex!”

We chuckle—but the fact is GREED can make us blind to what is truly important in life.

Sitting right in the middle of our Bibles is a cynic who writes in Ecclesiastes about the realities of life. He is *The Teacher* who says that he was King of Israel in Jerusalem: “I made great works; I built houses and planted vineyards for myself; I made myself gardens and parks, and planted in them all kinds of fruit trees. I made myself pools from which to water the forest of growing trees”, he tells us.

What did this wealthy man think of all he had done? He wrote, “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.”

The word translated there and throughout the Book of Ecclesiastes as “vanity” - the plain sense meaning of the original word is “a puff of wind,” “vapour,” “a breath.” The Teacher looks at all his accomplishments and says that they are but a puff of wind, a vapour, something that passes before it ever fully existed. He says, “What do mortals get from all their toil and strain with which they toil under the sun? For all their days are full of pain, and their work is vexation; even at night their minds do not rest. This also is vanity.”

“I had everything a man could desire!” and yet he says, “There was nothing worthwhile anywhere.”

“Everything is meaningless, utterly meaningless.”

Then he writes, “I saw under the sun in the place of justice, wickedness was there, and in the place of righteousness, wickedness was there as well.”

“I concluded that the dead are better off than the living. And most fortunate of all are those who were never born. For they have never seen all the evil that is done in our world.”

Ecclesiastes goes on for 12 chapters of brutal honesty. Do you think you can get ahead with wealth? He writes, “Those who love money will never have enough. How absurd to think that wealth brings true happiness! The

more you have, the more people come to help you spend it. So what is the advantage of wealth – except perhaps to watch it run through your fingers!”

The Teacher is not afraid to present life in all its frustratingly contradictory absurdity, even observing that study is a waste of time:

“Of making many books, there is no end, and much study is weariness of flesh.”

Yet the Teacher is an optimist. He writes, “I have observed something else in this world of ours. The fastest runner does not always win the race, and the strongest warrior doesn’t always win the battle. The wise are often poor, and the skilful are not necessarily wealthy. And those who are educated don’t always lead successful lives. It is all decided by chance, by being at the right place at the right time.”

Woven in the very fabric of this book is the idea that all that we have is a gift from God to be enjoyed. The Teacher says that God gives wisdom, knowledge and joy. **He tells us that God has made everything beautiful for its own time, for a day in ours.**

The way to find more fulfilment is to take joy in the gifts God has given you rather than to join in the all too human pursuit of the things you don’t have. The Teacher writes, “I have noticed one thing at least that is good. It is good for people to eat well, drink a glass of good wine, and enjoy their work – whatever they do under the sun – for however long God lets them live. And it is a good thing to receive wealth from God and the good health to enjoy it. To enjoy your work and accept your lot in life – that is indeed a gift from God. People who do this rarely look with sorrow on the past, for God has given them reasons for joy.”

The Teacher tells us that life is fleeting, but rather than being upset by that he concludes that we should get the enjoyment out of life that we can. Live life to the fullest by enjoying what you have or can achieve rather than by an endless pursuit of things that will not in themselves bring happiness. If you are not happy with what you have now, you will not become happier by getting more of it, or even something else. For happiness does not come from stuff. Know and appreciate what you have, the good and bad, as a gift from God.

This week I read a story about three sisters—ages 92, 94, and 96. These elderly siblings had never married and had lived together their entire LONG lives. One night, the 96-year-old sister drew a bath for herself. She

put one foot into the water, then paused and called out to her sisters asking, “Was I getting in the bath or out?” The 94-year-old shouted back, “I don’t know sister, but I’ll come up and see.” She started up the stairs, but stopped halfway and with a perplexed look on her face called out to her siblings, “Was I going up the stairs or coming down?” The “little” sister—the 92-year-old—was sitting at the kitchen having tea and she listened to her sisters’ interchange with a smirk on her face. She shook her head and said, “I sure hope I never get that forgetful,” and knocked on wood for good measure. Then she yelled out, “I’ll come up and help both of you as soon as I see who just knocked at the door.”

We can relate to this story because like these three spinsters we often struggle with failing memories. Anyone who spends any length of time ere will find me looking for those elusive keys!! Maybe we all endure a hurried pace of life—but the truth is all of us forget things: names, purses, keys...appointments. I bring all this up today because of the Gospel story of the rich fool!

(1) He remembered HIMSELF.

(2) He remembered this TEMPORARY world.

(3) He forgot His NEIGHBOURS. He was a landowner like those known by Jesus in Galilee. Powerful men who ruthlessly exploited farm-workers, thinking only about increasing their own welfare. The people feared and envied them: doubtlessly they were the fortunate ones. For Jesus, they are the most foolish. The rich man doesn’t understand that he lives closed in on himself, prisoner of a logic that dehumanizes him, emptying him of all dignity.

(4) He forgot the source of real JOY in life.

(5) He forgot TIME. He will, like us, all die today!

(6) And finally, he foolishly forgot GOD who is the source of every blessing we have.

I leave you with this little poem

*“Go give to the needy sweet charity’s bread.
For giving is living,” the angel said.
“And must I be giving again and again?”
My peevish, petulant answer ran.
“Oh, no,” said the angel piercing me through,
“Just give till the Master stops giving to you.”*

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