

A sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

You can't take it with you when you go

Ecclesiastes 1.2, 12-14; 2.18-23 Luke 12.13-21

Proper 13C

August 4th 2019

My father several times told me of a sermon he and his brother and sister had heard when they were on holiday in Wales as young people. The preacher had a trenchant preaching style they weren't quite used to from their more polite churches in London, and on top of that, he also had a slight speech impediment – so my father remembered it as rather comic when the preacher said: *'There'll be no cash boxes in your coffin; there'll be no pockets in your shroud ...'* Even years later, he used to weep with mirth when he re-told the story – but, you know what? I think that preacher may have been on to something. I think he may even have been preaching on today's Gospel text.

'You can't take it with you' – that's what they say, in less graphic terms; and that, of course, was exactly

what Jesus was saying in his parable of the rich fool. In the end, accumulating stuff gets you nowhere.

'Oh, but we do it for our children' many might reply; but the equally trenchant person who gave his title to the Book of Ecclesiastes (for that's what 'Ecclesiastes' means – the Preacher, or Teacher – has a riposte to that one: *'I hated all my toil in which had toiled under the sun, seeing that I must leave it to those who come after me – and who knows if they will be wise or foolish?'* (1.18). We may seek to provide for the future, but we can't control whether the future will go well. Indeed, a lot of possessions left to a family may even cause exactly the kind of rift that occasioned the parable Jesus told in the Gospel. Remember? *'A man from the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me."'*

I wonder how many people here have heard of, or even experienced family rows over wills and inheritance? Sometimes rifts which last a lifetime...

Of course, the opposite can happen, too: families can adjust the terms of an inheritance because one part of

the family stands in greater need than another; I've known that kind of generous giving-up, and I'd like to pay tribute to it. So, it's not money or possessions in themselves which are the evil thing, but the wrong attitude to them. It's how you use your money that shows your values. Do you remember another parable of Jesus – the one they call 'The parable of the unjust steward', about the man who fiddled his master's accounts to let his debtors off great proportions of what they owed - do you remember the strange ending to that parable? The master commended the dishonest steward for his dealings: said he was shrewd; and then Jesus says this about it, *'I tell you, make friends for yourself by means of dishonest wealth, so that when it is gone they may welcome you into the eternal homes.'* (Luke 16.10). What can that mean but this – use wealth, however you come by it, to enrich those less wealthy than yourself; this is part of the way of eternal life?

Now, returning to today's parable of the rich fool who planned to build himself bigger barns to store his wealth, St Augustine gave this commentary in the 4th century: The man in the parable *'was hoarding perishable crops, while he was himself on the point of perishing because he handed out nothing to the lord.*

How will he know where to look when at that trial (and Augustine is here referring to the Final Judgement) he starts hearing the words, "I was hungry, and you did not give me to eat?"" Augustine concludes that the fool *'didn't realise that the bellies of the poor were much safer storerooms than his barns.'*

That's trenchant, too, isn't it?

Yes, money *can* be used in ways which don't make us poor before God; it can be used with generosity and wisdom. But, let's be clear- a great deal of money, especially perhaps a sudden windfall, can provide great temptation. Whether or not you play the Lottery, I wonder if you've ever fantasised about what you might do if you suddenly came by several million out of the blue. I know I have. And my fantasy goes something like this: *'I'd keep ten per cent and then give the rest to charity... Well, maybe not 90 per cent... after all, I could also spend a bit more on this – or on that, and that would be reasonable. Perhaps I'd give half to charity... or a third (that would be generous, after all) – or... I don't know it would be so nice to have such and such, and the family might not be happy if I gave too much away...'*

Does that kind of dialogue sound like something which might go on in your head?

A great deal of money can whittle away at your values and good intentions. So, perhaps we shouldn't wish it for ourselves, however virtuous we might like to think we'd be with it. We could find we're not really very rich towards God, after all!

Why do we hoard? You don't even have to be particularly rich to do that. Maybe you don't hoard money – but other stuff.

Here a few reasons we may hoard unnecessarily: first, it's a very deep instinct, linked to survival. We share it with the animals. Watch the squirrels burying nuts in your lawn this autumn... We want to be secure for the future. And there's nothing inherently wrong with that. After all, insecurity isn't far away. Think of the crisis in social care, and it's reasonable to provide for your old age; look at the increasing number of homeless people, and it's not surprising if we try to shore ourselves and our families up against that possibility. But sometimes – *often*, even – the instinct to acquire and hoard runs away with itself. Take shopping, food shopping for example: we fall for the 'BOGOF' offer 'because it may

come in useful'; or, if you're like me, and do one main shop a month, you may simply buy more than you'll reasonably need: 'It will always be good to have cheese in the fridge', I say. What happened the other day was that I ended up with a *very* interesting coloured block of cheese in the fridge – one of those moulds which *aren't* recommended by gourmets. It was wasteful.

And my house is full of things which are wasting space, and don't get looked after properly – 'just in case'.

Well, that's a particular personality trait – not everyone's like that. Lots of people are tidy, and very good at ruthlessly throwing things out and having super tidy houses: my next-door neighbour seems to hire a skip for a throw-out at least once a year. But isn't that wasteful, too? Who among us never buys something we don't really need? Some shops and ads are full of what we call TYNKYN's – 'things you never knew you needed' – they appeal to the acquisitive hoarder in us all.

Sometimes we hoard for family reasons. We feel we have to keep stuff because someone passed it on to us, even though it gives us no particular joy: or we feel it's incumbent on us in our turn to hand on stuff on to the children. Do you know what? They may not value it. It

might be a burden to them, just as some things which were wished on us may have been a bit of a burden to us. Perhaps a more valuable gift we could pass on to future generations is the example of sitting light to things – of letting them go to where they really will give joy; the example of using the proceeds of selling material possessions wisely and well to benefit others. We may also bless our family by making the job of downsizing, when we need to, or the task of sorting out our things when we go, that much easier!

Maybe we acquire and hoard things to make an impression, to signify that we've 'made it' into a particular tribe in society. It could be a particular kind of car, it could be those very swish watches, or a silver tea service, or designer label shoes or even the house you buy which is designed to make an impression. But impressions can cut both ways – they may enlist you into some particular group, but make other people look at you and feel you're totally alien to them. We have to think hard as Christians about whether we want to cut ourselves off from some people in order to pull rank, or to make ourselves fit in with a small slice of society. Of course, if you own or acquire some valuable thing because you really love it – for itself – if you can thank

God for it with a truly grateful heart, that's another matter. Your unselfconscious enjoyment of it is much less likely to cut you off from others than possessing something just to make an impression. And your enjoyment will probably spill over to others, too, as you share the benefits generously.

The worst thing of all, is that sometimes people hoard things to give them power: remember, the parable was about a farmer storing grain. Isn't this how the markets work: people hoard or store things not just to feel secure, but actually to control prices, to drive them up, to make other people more dependent on them? Even in small ways you and I may do the same.

Ecclesiastes calls all the material things we work so very hard to acquire and hoard '*Vanity*' – even, '*Vanity of vanities*'. The word he uses literally signifies a puff of air. He seemed very depressed, in the passage we heard today, about the pointlessness of it all, but elsewhere in his book he acknowledges the temporary delight that material things can give, which should lead to the grateful praise of our Creator.

'Vanity' is also another way of talking about idolatry in Scripture. Jesus today was talking to us about the vanity

of greed – material possession without the values in our hearts which make us ‘rich towards God’; and like the preacher in Wales, he was reminding us trenchantly of the obvious fact that ‘we can’t take it with us when we go’. So, perhaps it’s the right time for some of us to be re-assessing our attitudes to what we own.