

## **18<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME – YEAR C (2025)**

When reading an ancient text, such as the Bible, we can run into two dangers: first, we might fail to appreciate the original context in which it was written, and the audience to whom its words were initially addressed; and, secondly, even if we do give due consideration to those factors, we run the risk of over-contextualising it – as, at two thousand and more years' distance, we interpret its teachings only for the time and people for whom they were written, thereby absolving ourselves of any need to be challenged by them, and weakening their power to change lives and contemporary society, and to lead us to God.

Today's Gospel reading is one such example: Jesus' parable of the rich man's predicament might be interpreted simply as a moral injunction against greed, and as a necessary reminder that death can come at any time, in spite of the plans that one might have made for the future. But, considered in its original context – and in the context of the theology of S. Luke's Gospel – it becomes more than a warning or a piece of good advice; and is thereby salutary and pertinent for Jesus' followers in every generation and age.

For, far from being just good sense, Jesus' words were spoken in the context of his preaching about the Kingdom of God – that expansive vision for life and our relationships with one another and the divine, as God intends them to be. And this, of course, includes our attitude towards our own possessions, and the material things of life; just as it challenges our thoughts and behaviour towards

those who have more than we do, and our own ideas about what security and prosperity might look like.

And at the heart of all this, as the parable makes clear, is that deeply human but also potentially destructive emotion, anxiety. Fear of loss or the future, lack of agency or the means to make ends meet, are the constant and debilitating concern, not only of many in our own society, but also of most human beings throughout history. We all know the things that make us worry, and the levels at which anxiety strikes, which will be different for each one of us; but that does not diminish the power that anxiety has to distract and exhaust us, especially when we are up against it, and feel ourselves to be without choice, opportunity or the power to change things for the better.

It would be very easy for a preacher now to quote S. Peter's injunction from his first epistle as a proof-text: 'Cast all your care upon [the Lord]; for he cares for you', but is it really quite so simple? To brush away the legitimate anxieties of life in so facile a way is to fail to take seriously both their real and depleting power, but also to diminish the power of God's grace to liberate us, and of our need to play our part in recalibrating our relationships with him in such a way as to use the good and necessarily provisional things of this life with a healthy sense of detachment, whilst acknowledging the source of all goodness, and orientating our lives God-ward, rather than on things that cannot endure. God does indeed care for us; but we will only worry less when we learn to trust him more.

Because, for the Christian, the whole of life is a journey of ever-growing trust in God's mercy, providence and grace: it is the commitment to Jesus' vision for human life and flourishing that pertains in heaven and, through our co-operation, may do so on earth; and it is a participation in the creative and reconciling power of God's love, which seeks to draw all people into the life of the Holy Trinity – giving us a new perspective, and a set of priorities that enables us to be set free from the crippling anxieties of this life, because we live in the knowledge that God is good, and as in control; and that, in that knowledge and by that grace, we might set less store by the things of this world, and tread more lightly its ways, because we know our true security, prosperity and peace to be in God's keeping, and that we are held in the embrace of the love that will not let us go. But, for all that, we still live in a world which actually encourages anxiety: competition to succeed, pressure at work and to conform, the crisis of image, and the drive for comfort and status – all of these forces insidiously and explicitly condition our thinking and behaviour, and add to our fears. But, far from offering us self-help, Jesus' teaching today gives us more than a temporary inoculation, a fast-food-style quick-fix for that desired but short-lived sugar-rush. Because, what Jesus offers is a relationship that transcends the low concerns and trivialities of life; and helps us to view our temporal difficulties in the context of the eternal, recalibrating the value we place on the material things of this world, by convincing us of the true and lasting treasure of that which is to come.

To be a Christian is not to be spared the harsh realities of life, nor to be placed in a hermetically-sealed vacuum that protects us from fear and pain: rather, our relationship with Jesus enables us to encounter life's difficulties, sorrows and anxieties head-on and with courage; principally, by the means that he has given us precisely for this purpose, in the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar – the guarantee and power of his grace, and the assurance of his presence with us through thick and thin.

We cannot eliminate anxiety from life, and many of our worries are entirely legitimate. But, when faced in fellowship with Jesus, we learn to see that so much of life is, in the words of the Preacher of Ecclesiastes, 'Vanity of vanities'; and that it is only by grace that we are able to discern that which is vain from that which is truly important; and thus, by being concerned about the right things, might turn anxiety into action, and become agents for good.

Faith in Jesus does not offer us a placebo but, rather, helps us to see life as it really is, and as it is intended to be. And it is only with this insight, and in the power of his vision, that we are able to navigate the ways of this world in such a way as to give first place to God, and his kingdom. This will mean a necessary change in our attitudes and behaviour; just as it will involve a reassessment of our priorities in favour of storing up treasure in heaven. For, if God makes demand of your soul tonight, one thing is certain: he will be interested in the size of your bank balance; but at the bank of heaven, and not Lloyds or HSBC.