

**SERMON FOR TRINITY 7 AT SOUTH NEWTON BENEFICE HC: 31-07-22  
(based on Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2: 18-23: Luke 12:13-21: Col.3:1-11)**

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O God our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Before I embark on a sermon about how humankind tends to value wealth and possessions over God and good works, I have to confess that I, like my mum before me, am a bit of a hoarder. And I don't have the excuse of wartime rationing - simply that it might come in useful one day! Today's readings are about the choices we make, and the relative emphases we put on self-seeking action and acquisition, versus God-seeking and Christ-filled lives. Can we redefine the meaning of life, and indeed our legacy, by those choices? Let's consider what the readings say about that.

The writer of Ecclesiastes, widely assumed to be a teacher or preacher, appears to have a pretty negative outlook on life, summed up as "vanity" - a lot of pointless work and effort for nothing. The writer has a cynical honesty that could be found disheartening. Looking closer, we understand that for this teacher, everything we do is like "chasing after wind", ie transitory, futile and meaningless. He has observed that it is an "unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with". This, having been written before Jesus came to clarify things for us, comes across as a lack of faith in the God who delights in our very being, and an absence of joy in the world he created. In later verses, the writer suggests we might as well simply "eat drink and be merry", echoed in Luke's parable of the rich fool. Not that I've got anything against eating, drinking and being merry.....Though surely there is more to life than short-lived pleasure? Furthermore, we're told the results of all that skill, effort and worry become a legacy to be enjoyed by those who have not worked for it. My goodness, what a depressingly one-sided view of life! Fortunately, both Luke and Paul, while acknowledging the element of truth in this outlook, point to alternative ways of living. After all, we do have choices.

From someone who looked for life's purpose and meaning in work and pleasure, we turn to Jesus' parable about the rich fool, told in response to a request that Jesus intervene in an inheritance dispute. This farmer was a fool, not because he had had a good harvest, but because he was rich (Luke's Jesus is always comparing the selfish rich with the needy) and he looked for life's meaning in hoarding wealth. He aimed to store his over-

abundance for himself, to enjoy in a future full of eating, drinking and being merry. But God knows that he will die that very night, adding, “and the things you have prepared, whose will they be then?”. Here the parable is obliquely responding to the inheritance problem that had been put to Jesus. The answer is that there’s no point in setting our hearts on earthly treasures rather than on God. Indeed, it is clear, from the man’s constant repetition of “I” in his list of plans for his accumulated wealth, that his actions are completely selfishly motivated. He had enough, both for himself and to share, but he chose not to. His pre-occupation with acquisition left no room for God or for other people. He had decided what was important and lived life by that decision - his choice, but it does not bring him closer to God.

Luke’s message is that we are to decide, day to day, what to value, what to pour our hearts into, for tomorrow may be too late. The two brothers, arguing over their inheritance, have a chance to listen to Jesus and choose his way, or to allow their desire for money to distract them.

The Colossians have already made their choice, ie the new life of Christ.

Paul suggests it is not made just the once, but lived out and reaffirmed every day. That big decision, to live in Christ, increasingly shapes our smaller, everyday choices. So what is the nature of the choice being offered?

Despite how Paul paints the picture, I don’t see it as being between a harsh and pleasure-denying morality and a hedonistic, self-centred lifestyle. It does however mean not allowing the pull of vice and greed to cause us to lose a sense of God’s purpose, of what is right and wrong. Our belief and faith in Christ enables a new self to emerge from the old, not unlike Paul himself in his transformation from Saul.

We know that Paul is an advocate for living in Christ through kindness and generosity towards others. But we need also to “seek things that are above”. It is a matter of priorities and getting the right balance. Ultimately, setting our minds on the divine Kingdom of God will help us to live better lives in his earthly Kingdom. Investing so much in possessions and selfish pleasures distracts from that choice to live in Christ and be attentive to the needs of those around us.

Then there are the destructive emotions that we direct at others - anger, malice and abuse. Paul renounces excess in all its forms. Once stripped of

them, we are able to reclothe in the image of God, to live more simply and compassionately. The result? Paul gives us a clue when he says “there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, enslaved and free, but Christ is all and in all”. A perfect world would see the elimination of religious, cultural and economic divisions.

To sum up, life should be inspired by God, not driven by greed. It was the vanity of striving for ephemeral rewards that drove the writer of Ecclesiastes to despair. Luke teaches us that finite things do not have infinite value. Paul believes that those with a heavenly focus are more likely to do earthly good. The saying “enough is as good as a feast” is illustrated well in these readings. And as we come shortly in today’s service to the point where we take communion and turn our thoughts very firmly to Christ, may we “feed on Him in [our] hearts, by faith, with thanksgiving”.

In the name of Christ, amen.