

The Catholic Parish of Petworth & Midhurst West Sussex

Fr Peter's Homily for The Eighteenth Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year C)
31st July 2022

Today's Gospel contains the parable of the rich fool, one of the most graphic and visual of all the parables. But we have a bit of a problem with parables, even ones like this. The problem is that we know them so well. The story is so familiar to us that we know how it will end before it even begins, and we have probably already decided what its message is. We have completely lost the sense of shock that the first hearers would have had when they heard for the first time: *'This very night the demand will be made for your soul...'* If novelty was the big issue I suppose I could try and make up a modern version of the parable, but it would hardly be in the same league as the words of the Lord himself. So we have to put a bit of effort in to be stirred by this parable as the first hearers were.

It's a similar story with that first reading, which is so familiar to us, and is clearly rather beautiful, but what does it actually mean? It doesn't mean vanity in the sense of self-love and admiration, but in the sense of futility and absurdity. Robert Alter's translation has this: *'Merest breath, said Qohelet, merest breath. All is mere breath.'*

All the things that we think are so solid, so substantial, so reliable, turn out to be no more solid than the breath I breathe out, lost and dispersed in the twinkling of an eye.

The fool in the parable thinks that his enormous harvest is quite something. It is something so solid that he can really build on this, really use this as a foundation for a life of idleness, the solid base on which to found a life of self-seeking and pleasure. But too late he discovers that it is in fact mere breath, it has no real substance at all, it is worse than running sand as a foundation on which to build a life.

The rich fool thinks that his great harvest means he has found a way that he need no longer needs to contribute, now he can simply consume. This is where his folly really lies. His great error is not just in thinking that physical things can give complete security – absurd as that is, because of course physical possessions are not able to give spiritual or emotional security. The really deep mistake comes in thinking that he has so mastered the world around him that he can become completely a consumer; he plans to live entirely off what he has achieved in the past, and no longer putting anything back. This is where he really speaks to the folly of our modern world

Like the rich fool, we have bought into the idea that with a bit of luck and some scientific cunning we can get to the stage where we, too, can become more and more completely consumers. We have persuaded ourselves (or we have been persuaded) that the real aim of life is to be able to consume without limit, and the beautiful world in which God has placed us is beginning to groan under the weight of that expectation. The rich fool uses his wealth to allow himself to become exclusively a consumer, the meaning of his life is derived entirely from what he consumes, and so perhaps it is not surprising that such a vacuous life is quickly brought to a close. But, lest we feel virtuous that we are not like that, is it really so? Is there not a little of the rich fool in all of us?

Have we not at some level believed the old lie that physical possessions set us free to pursue just pleasure – eat, drink, have a good time?

Wealth and possessions are not bad things in themselves (so long as we realise that none of it is really ours, and our luxurious excess is in reality the bread of the hungry; our luxuries are someone else's necessities). But wealth becomes very dangerous indeed if we use it as a prop that allows us to become purely consumers, as the fool believes he can. The wise person realises that wealth must never blunt the edge of our striving. It must never stop us passionately striving for virtue, striving to be greater at loving, striving to be more generous, striving always to be the saint that God has created us to become.

Possessions – and in a sense, in the context of much of our world, to possess almost anything is to be wealthy – must never become props that allow us to be just consumers; we must never allow them to take the edge off our hunger for holiness. Seen in the light of the things that really matter, all possessions are mere breath. No-one will be asked at the end of their days how big their barns were; nor will they be asked how early they were able to retire to a life of idleness. But we will all be asked what we did with the contents of our barns, and how we balanced striving for virtue and holiness with consumption and pleasure. As long as freeing ourselves up to consume is our goal, we will never be ready for Heaven, because Heaven will be blissfully empty of excess, in everything but love.