

Worship for Sunday 31st July 2022

Call to worship

On this middle of the summer Sunday, we step away from our preoccupations: what is ahead for those I love....what will happen to me as I get older....will I have enough money for all my needs, or is having too much really the problem.

We have travelled from the simpler life of our childhood into an age fraught with complications. We have choices, apparently, but perhaps little control over the big things. We have worked hard, thought things out, done our best, but all around us: uncertainty.

And now we wait in the presence of God, and this is certain: we, and those around us, and those in our neighbourhood, are all loved by God equally... our shortcomings are overcome by kindness and grace... our lives have meaning and worth and we are precious in the eyes of God.

Really, we need have no fear, so let us worship God.

Hymn 71: Give thanks unto the Lord our God

Prayer

God of summer sun and soft refreshing rain, we come with thanksgiving. Your love is constant and unshakable, and you have not abandoned us when we have abandoned you. Your ways are always the same, your insistence on compassion unwavering, and you are kind to us when we are not kind to each other. And you, you who alone are wholly good and true and righteous, go on welcoming us into your near presence even when it seems you are no more than an afterthought. We come now, not to make amends, but to recognise our shortcomings. For a moment, we ponder them....

God who makes no difference between us, we come in the name of Jesus and are ready to listen. He is our guide and example, our redeemer and companion, and we look to him. We cannot comprehend his willingness to lay down his life in the name of love. But when we wrestle with his sacrifice, we are filled with hope. Love cannot be overcome and we are encouraged: by loving with constancy and selflessness, we too may change lives for your sake. Keep us mindful that you have work for us to do, and help us to do it always, with humility, strength and gentleness.

God of the gentle breeze and the howling gale, come in the power of the Holy Spirit and enliven us. Lift us from our weariness, our defeatism, the crippling effect of uncertainty, and call us back to the life you would have us lead. Turn our thoughts from self to others, our motivation from self-satisfaction to the well-being of the least and the lost and give us joy in worship and service. You who are mighty but gentle

have called us all to faith. May we walk in your ways, daily, hour by hour, minute to minute, that our whole lives may speak your love aloud in every place.

Amen.

Reading: Luke 12 verses 13 - 21

Hymn 468: Son of God, eternal Saviour

Sermon

Luke 12 verse 20: But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you."

If last week's challenge was to preach on prayer and not end up making the whole enterprise sound like a chore, today's is close, but different: to preach on this somewhat scary parable of Jesus and not end up depressing us all!!

Being a conductor of funeral services means that I often sit down with family members for the specific purpose of looking back: looking back over the life of a loved one, learning as much as I can (especially if I don't already know the person) and gathering information. I'm going to do it again this afternoon. With care and attention, and a cooperative family - they almost always are, and if not, there's usually a good reason - it's possible to write everything into a brief but meaningful life story that reflects what was important in the person's life and made them the person they were. And so funerals are in some respects a retrospective, a reprise of a life with the main points highlighted.

Some folk love to live in the past - not least in church life - but because my life is busy (just a bit, and as it should be), I tend to live in the present. What's happening this week? Who am I visiting today? Have I agendas to prepare, phone calls to make, difficult emails to answer? I try hard to focus on what's immediately before me and give each task or encounter my best shot.

And I try to avoid looking to the future. Of course retirement is not that far away. I have to start thinking about that. When will it be? Where will I live? Will I give up work entirely or engage in ministry part time? Then there's the fact that the church is in turmoil, languishing in a kind of limbo that will end in things not being the way they are now, but with as yet scarcely any indication of how that future will look. Then there's Old Kilpatrick Bowling Church, for which I am also currently responsible, with neither treasurer or session clerk, and prospects for which the word "challenging"

comes nowhere close as a description. I have told you before about my friend, Gordon Stevenson, who, on the verge of retirement and having just sold his hugely successful business, received a terminal diagnosis from his doctor. Suddenly, he had no future. Gordon's memory lingers and makes me disinclined to look too far ahead.

More recently, folk have seen their planned future ripped away when their business folded under the rigours of the Covid 19 pandemic, coming, like Gordon Stevenson's illness, from nowhere, and wreaking havoc. And if you are a Ukrainian farmer, war has suddenly made your life utterly precarious.

The truth is, I think, that looking to the future is in some ways inevitable, some ways distracting, but also in some ways right. And we also all have things to which we cling, perfectly understandably. Books are a thing for me. I need to have, besides the one I'm currently reading, at least two in reserve; three, if I'm going on holiday. Some of us have countless albums of family photographs, documents, letters, an assortment of items that belonged to a much-loved family member who died some time ago, well stocked freezers and cupboards, several wardrobes full of clothes, or a garage, bulging with endless bits and pieces that one day might just come in handy. We're all, one way or another, attached to things. But here's the problem: who's going to sort it all out when we die?

Jesus' questioner of the day was, undoubtedly, focused on both the present and the future. He wanted Jesus to arbitrate in a dispute with his brother over their inheritance, but Jesus made plain he wasn't getting into that kind of thing. Why would he? He was neither a lawyer who sat in the Property, Trusts and Succession class at Glasgow University, nor a tax specialist. It wasn't his business. Jesus' business, as we're about to be reminded, is keeping us focused on the things that matter, the things of God and of heaven. But the question gave Jesus an excuse to tell another story. He just couldn't resist it, and launched into this one, that we call "The Parable of the Rich Fool". He prefaces it with a warning against greed, then tells the story of a wealthy farmer.

Last weekend I noticed huge vehicles on the road loaded so high with bales of hay that it looked as if they might topple over, and I let out a little breath of relief when we passed each other. Having spent, these last years, a little more time than previously in a more rural setting, I've come to take farmers a little less for granted. Not so long ago, on the front at Rothesay, I got talking to a farmer walking her dog. She told me a little about her dairy farm. She would doubtless have to continue to deal with uncertainties and economic difficulties, but where to store her crops would not be an issue, as she didn't grow any. In Jesus' story, the man has just that

problem. Already rich (hold on to the phrase), he enjoys a bumper harvest, and thinks he has a problem. He *does* have a problem! **What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.**

Maybe most of us, until the Ukraine war, didn't think too much about where our bread came from. This, of course, despite the fact that always, somewhere in the world, folk are dying of starvation, in numbers. Let's confess: as long as it was there, sitting waiting for us on the supermarket shelf, we didn't think. But then, last weekend, a deal was struck to get the tons and tons of grain out of Ukraine, and then the very next day the port of Odessa was bombed. And so on Sunday night we saw a farmer with mounds of grain, waiting to turn bad if a way couldn't be found, almost immediately, to ship it out. His was the opposite problem of the rich fool in the parable. I'm guessing he was an ordinary farmer, desperate, not to hoard his crops, but to get them out. But our man hoards. **This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain.**

That's the first thing that gets Jesus. He has more than he needs. Of what material things have we got more than we need? You wouldn't have to be a theological rocket scientist (just as well...) to figure that Jesus' gospel is about sharing, being generous, giving away your excess, giving away almost anything at all if your neighbour's need is greater than yours. I'm guessing Jesus wasn't exactly delighted, either, with the man's complacency. **And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry."** No indication, then, that he's reaching for his cheque book or credit card to make a sizeable donation to the nearest food bank. The guy's concern begins and ends with his own financial security. I don't think Jesus has a problem with people being financially prudent. Spending beyond our means, frittering away our money and landing in debt, indulging ourselves at the expense of family, or others, or our church, would seem to be unwise. I guess Jesus would expect self-reliance, where possible (it's not always, of course), and consider financial recklessness a problem. But what Jesus apparently just cannot stomach is this man's attitude that places all his energy, thinking and acting on getting as rich as he can and then folding his hands and sitting back to enjoy an easy life. And it's not just that this attitude conflicts with what Jesus is at pains to teach and demonstrate in his gospel, it's that, according to him, it's plain daft, for this reason: it takes no account of God. **You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you.** And then Jesus adds just a little bit of sheer practicality: **Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?** Sobering, to say the least. Chilling, perhaps. And, as ever with Jesus, redolent with truth.

We never know, do we, what lies ahead. Like Gordon Stevenson, you can plan all you like for retirement, only to have the prospect of it ripped away. Your life can change in an instant. We all know how: not just illness, but accident, or family (if we have one) catastrophe, or crime. Or some long-forgotten secret from our past life being revealed and exposing the truth of us. Life may not have that happy ending for which we all long.

And neither do many of Jesus' stories. Some do, though, and they tend to be the ones we like, and remember. The Good Samaritan... the Prodigal Son... the Lost Sheep. Jesus doesn't say the words, but they have, even if fleetingly, an "And they all lived happily ever after" feel to them. But not this one, obviously.

But, thank goodness, all is not lost, and I might yet be able to end this sermon on a positive, or bright, note. Jesus' last words in the parable are these: **This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich towards God.** Maybe time, then, to cut ourselves a bit of slack and think: we are rich towards God, in these ways: we are here today because we know, at least in part, who God is, and therefore to offer our thanks, adoration, praise and honour.... we have heard the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ and committed ourselves to following it, even to the extent of aiming at selflessness and believing that this life is not an end in itself, but preparation for resurrection life....and, in so doing, we have opened ourselves up to the power of the holy spirit, even now at work in us. Maybe, then, knowing where our true riches lie, it's time to go home and tackle that attic, cupboard or garage, the contents of which, one day, will not amount to a hill of beans, and be about as much use....

Hymn 505: All that I am, all that I do

Prayer

Provider God, we confess: it is sometimes easier to concentrate on the material than the eternal, and so we fuss about things: how to acquire them, where to store them, how much they cost; but eventually we may discover that paying them too much attention costs us everything. That which gives meaning and purpose, shape and colour to our lives is neglected, distorted, dismissed. Help us, in our prayers which are our preparation for the rest of our lives, to figure out what really matters. With that in mind, we come to pray for others and for ourselves.

We pray for peace in every place where it is absent: in war torn places like Syria, Yemen and Ukraine.... in our communities and neighbourhoods... in our churches and in our families... and in our own hearts. And if we truly want it, let us make it our priority.

We pray for dignity for every human being who has been robbed of it, by poverty, by prejudice, by the petty-mindedness of others. Especially in these times we pray for individuals and households where economic factors beyond their control have rendered them reliant on others for the basics.

We pray for love for all those starved of it: for children conceived in reckless haste only to be regarded as a nuisance, inconvenience, or irritation; for old folk abandoned by families with little concern; and for those in turmoil in their middle years, trapped in an abusive marriage and living in misery and fear.

Provider God, wherever and to whomsoever we can, may we bring peace and dignity and love. These are the things you have taught us to value. May we prize them above all things. And hear our prayers now, made in the quietness, for the things we need. May they indeed be the things we truly need....

Hymn 655: For your generous providing

Benediction

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you and all those whom you love. Now and always.

Amen.