

*Hosea 11.1-11 Colossians 3.1-11 Luke 12:13-21*

Life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.

Well, we all know that - life doesn't consist of possessions, there are things which are much more important than the acquisition of goods.

For a start health. Most of us would agree that health is more important than possessions. But life does not consist of abundance of good health either. Not that there is anything wrong in possession of themselves, just as there is certainly nothing wrong in good health. In fact, we believe that God loves us, personally as individuals, and we believe that he cares for us, and our well-being is part his plan for us. And, of course, the Bible teaches us to pray for those who are sick, and earnestly to desire that they be restored to good health.

But in a way, health and wealth can be problematic, because they are two of the many idols presented to us by our society. They are seen as things to be attained, to be desired, coveted, our goal in life - so we need to devote our energies to achieving riches and similarly health.

Health, wealth, not wrong in themselves, but so easily accorded the wrong priority, so easily put first.

Jesus' parable about the rich fool illustrates this very aptly - the rich fool forgot God's values.

It is quite a sobering story isn't it? The estates of this rich landowner were fertile, yielding abundant crops, a bumper harvest. The rich get richer. Wealth, though, brings its problems - the man did not have enough storage space for all his grain. So he decided to tear down his present barns and build bigger and better ones so that there will be room for all his produce and goods. His future is secured, he is so well off that now he can relax and enjoy his wealth. Only he can't, because he dies.

The rich man tried to find his security and comfort in the abundance of the possessions he has stored up for himself. 'You fool', says God. And, as Jesus expresses it, the man chose to 'store up treasures for himself' rather than to be 'rich towards God'. The man lived with the wrong set of values, the wrong set of ultimate concerns. His life was characterized by - greed. He forgot that God is the source of all that we have.

The Gospel passage continues with Jesus' well-known words about not worrying about possessions, or what we shall eat or drink or what we'll wear.

He says: Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, and yet God feeds them. Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.

Along with Christians down the ages, we cannot fail to be struck by the naive piety of the words - the idea is very comforting, but it makes us want to shout, 'it's not like that'. Dying birds (ravens, not to mention other animals and humans) become caught

in the tragedy of famine conditions - and the awful ravages of the many war-torn regions of our world seem to contradict this teaching that it is senseless to be concerned with life's necessities. We can't simply ignore the needs of our families - so what is it all about?

Is Jesus telling us to be happy-go-lucky, 'don't worry, be happy' types? Is he commanding us not to be greedy? Is he telling us not to be slaves to anxiety, especially over material goods? Or is he talking about our essential attitudes, the one which underlie our actions? With such a wide and confusing number of possible interpretations, his call to stop worrying can be quite disturbing.

But those words of Jesus about not worrying about the necessities of life - whatever they may be - is a call to life itself. That's not to say it is a call away from common sense and basic prudence, but rather that it is a call away from an attempt to secure life through our own human effort, especially in terms of material goods.

It is a call to God and godliness - to a life of distinctive values - a life whose riches are not counted in terms of possessions and money, nor even in health, but in a quality of life that is Christ-like. A life in relationship with God, a life reflecting God's generosity to us and imitating that generosity wherever we can.

At every communion service, we celebrate the fact that God cares for our material and physical well-being, that he provides for our needs. We can rejoice in the good things that he gives us, and we can pray with confidence for the relief of our troubles and hurts; and we can do so without succumbing to the tyranny of health or wealth - because our relationship with God depends on neither of these.

They are of secondary importance as we seek first the kingdom of God. Amen.