

Reflection 31st July

In Buddhism there is a meditation practice called “marana-sati” or death awareness practice. This involves contemplating your mortality as you sit in a cemetery, visualise your own dying, or revisit the death of those you have known. Not an easy spiritual practice! Being with that experience and your own response is supposed to help you recognise the impermanence of life, and become more aware of your life priorities. It’s also said to help cultivate wisdom and compassion as you realise your common vulnerability with others. Similar events may have led the psalmist to articulate some of the thoughts and feelings we heard in Psalm 49.

Perhaps you have experienced something of this as you sat in vigil with someone who was dying. Funerals can have a similar impact and I know many of us attended Graham Howell’s funeral yesterday and so may already be in this reflective space. Or perhaps there’s been a time when you heard bad news about your own health.

Working as a palliative care nurse means that death is never far from MY thoughts. No need for me to go out of my way to find this experience! It’s good, though definitely confronting, for us to pause and think more consciously about the realities of death and to wonder how that might affect the way we live our lives now.

If Psalm 49 presents this issue in poetic form, the Gospel reading from Luke 12 offers us a parable. As you probably know, Jesus’ parables were designed to provoke thought and question accepted norms.

So let’s see what we can learn from this one.

A man in the crowd asks Jesus to settle a family dispute over an estate. Jesus responds by telling the Parable of the Rich Fool. This parable tells the story of a

wealthy farmer who has fertile land which produces large harvests. He decides to store the grain up in new barns, only to find that he will die that night. In this dramatic situation, the farmer's values become clear and are found to be sadly lacking

I'd like to share a little of my response to this reading and raise some questions for us to think about.

Being alongside people who are coming to the end of their lives, I've noticed that what is often most important for them is their relationships with their nearest and dearest. Personal relationships can both trouble people and also give great comfort at this time.

In the parable, there seems to be a strange lack of relationships with others.

The vibrant painting by Thomas Poole on the front of the order of service shows the farmer sitting in the shade with his feet up and a glass of wine in his hands. Meanwhile shadowy, anonymous workmen construct the barn that will hold his riches. Artistic license perhaps, since these workmen are not actually mentioned in the parable.

Instead it's clear that the rich farmer is thinking only about himself- you can tell from the words used, "What should I do?", "I know, I'll tear down my barns", "Then I'll have room enough", "I'll sit back and say to myself". A lot of "I's" in there! (Fitzmyer 1985).

In his book "Jesus through Middle Eastern eyes" Kenneth Bailey explains that in the culture of Jesus' time, a communal decision would have normally been made about this sort of overabundance. The wellbeing of the whole community would have been considered. The fact that the farmer makes the decision about what to do with his bumper crops alone, suggests that he was isolated from others and unaware (and perhaps uncaring) of their needs.

For all his wealth the rich farmer seems to live an impoverished existence in terms of his relationships with others.

This might make us wonder....How are the important relationships in our lives? Is there someone we need to reconnect with? An apology to make, a misunderstanding to clear up, an affirmation to offer or a "thank you" to say?

Gratitude can, surprisingly enough, be among the different emotions that people experience as they come to the end of their lives. Never in my nursing career have I experienced so much appreciation as I have in my work as a palliative care nurse. This reveals itself in many different ways, from words of thanks to gifts of cakes and chocolates. Emails are regularly circulated to those of us working at the hospice, with messages from grateful relatives- this has often been accompanied by a generous donation to our work.

But when we turn to the parable and look for signs of any gratitude in that story, there are none. Nothing indicates that the farmer was especially hardworking or inventive, nor particularly deserving of his rich crops. Yet he neither offers prayers of thanksgiving nor shows any positive emotion at all for his good fortune.

If anything, his unexpected wealth seems to be a problem he has to solve. The richness of his harvests could have been a great opportunity. We can visualise how the surplus might have financed a new irrigation system that made life better for everyone in the area. Or supported the womenfolk through a donation to enable them to set up a social enterprise promoting their creative skills in spinning and weaving.

On their own, money, possessions or a rich crop have no intrinsic significance. It is the MEANING we attach to them that is revealing and the USE that we make of them that demonstrates what really matters to us.

Just one example from my own life...

I was a bit of a late developer and it took me until I was 45 to get my act together and save up enough money to get a mortgage and buy a house. That coincided with getting my New Zealand Citizenship. So for me those two events meant that I was putting down roots here, committing myself to this country and investing in my future here.

This might make us ponder.....what is our response to the rich gifts we have received? How do we as individuals and a community make decisions about the most meaningful way for us to invest our time, energy and resources? And how can we make sure those decisions are congruent with our personal values and our vision for our life together?

Perhaps the thing that touches me most working with those who are dying is their gradual loss of power and control. Frightening though it is to realise, it seems to me that dying is really a huge process of letting go. This often evokes compassion and tender loving care in those around the dying person.

So just one more thing about the parable. It looks like the farmer has miscalculated. He may be a good businessman but he has lost touch with some basic realities of life. He doesn't recognise the uncomfortable vulnerability and lack of control which are a fundamental part of our human existence. When suddenly the moment of his death approaches, the farmer is powerless and his wealth useless. It appears that he has avoided these realities focussing instead on his possessions and living a life of ease. This, perhaps deliberately, has distracted him from the hard questions of life. So he has not been able to

reach out to the Source of his wealth and being, or struggle towards some sort of deeper response.

This might make us reflect...

What difference could recognising our own vulnerability and the uncertainty of life make to how we live our lives now?

Is there anything we do to avoid the implications of these uncomfortable truths?

Is that a healthy and wise thing to do?

For those who may be recalling other parables and sayings of Jesus about possessions I'd like to take a minute to set this parable in its context.

Luke Timothy Johnson (2011) notes that there is no one unified approach to worldly goods in Luke's Gospel. Instead Jesus responds to each individual situation differently. Another commentator (Lieu 1997) suggests that in this particular parable, Luke may have been addressing a wealthy element within his own community.

That being said, Luke's Gospel shows a definite bias towards the poor.

"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" (Luke 6:20).

And there is also an acknowledgement in the Gospel that being prosperous can be a barrier to responding fully to God "How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God". (Luke:18:24).

To finish up though, it might be worth thinking about what alternative is being put forward to the rich farmer's "foolish" approach to his wealth. The parable

ends with these words from Jesus- “a person is a fool to store up earthly wealth but not have a rich relationship with God”.

Some of the qualities which manifest the “rich relationship with God” are clear.

An attitude of trust is commended. Jesus, speaking to the gathered crowd, points out how useless it is to worry, pointing out examples of God’s care in the natural world around them, the ravens, the wild flowers. (Luke 12:22)

Generosity to others is a sign of this rich relationship. You may remember the story of Zaccheus, the tax collector, who after he encounters Jesus announces he will give away ½ of all he possesses and refund four times over anyone he has cheated in his role as tax collector. (Luke 19:1-10)

Freedom and courage are also part of this rich relationship. Freedom to risk, to leave behind what previously seemed important for the unknown possibilities of life on the road with Jesus, as the first disciples did. (Luke 5:9-11)

Courage to put who you are on the line, to commit your intention and energy to what you believe, despite opposition and threat, despite your own weaknesses and doubts, as the first disciples did.

None of which is easy to do in our complex, conflict-filled world.

Luckily we don’t have to wait until we encounter death to become just a little more conscious and aware. We don’t need to be in a state of crisis to take the first steps to becoming more compassionate or wise people. If we are open to it, the ups and downs of our daily lives can prompt reflection on our priorities and values. The small deaths and resurrections of life NOW can waken us up to what matters most for us.

We can be sensitised to this process by the use of some sort of regular spiritual practice. There are many options- find what that works for you! As a little taster, later in the service, as the offering basket comes round you are invited to

pick up one of the slips of paper in it to take home and try out the suggested spiritual practice written on it. A Free Will Offering FOR you in recognition of the fact that all of life is gift 😊 If you find it works for you, let me know, there are more where that came from.

Meantime let us share a short period of silence as we think about these things.

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