

Luke 12. 13 – 21. Trinity 10, 31st July

Those of you who are familiar with George Eliot's great novel, *Middlemarch*, will remember the furore that followed the reading of Peter Featherstone's will. The vultures had gathered in the expectation of rich pickings. The blood relatives and connections by marriage were already reckoning what their inheritance was likely to be hardly before the corpse was cold. Sadly all their hopes were doomed to disappointment, a stranger was present, an ugly young man who was the secret, natural son of the deceased, apart from a few minor bequests he was the sole heir. The bitterness of the disappointed was great, the complaining was vociferous and the greatest clamour came from those who had least need of the inheritance. Which demonstrates Elliot's insight into human nature which hasn't changed much, the vultures are still with us.

Indeed I came across a new word the other week, *affluenza*, it describes those poor people who have been bitten by the money bug. Those afflicted by it suffer from an insatiable hunger to swallow more and more of what they already have more than enough of, they have a feverish compulsion to lay their hands on everything within reach and the progress of the disease is not measured by temperature charts but by bank accounts.

It is impossible to open a daily newspaper without being confronted by sufferers from this contagious condition. The afflicted bankers, for example, are rarely out of the news, still condemned unjustly by those who are unaware of the virus in their bloodstream which needs an annual injection of millions to be kept under control. Think also of that pitiable woman who emerged from the divorce courts the other week with the largest settlement in the history of divorce proceedings. Do not condemn her, she desperately needed the £75,000,000 to maintain three houses, five cars and the £1,000,000 a year the disease compels her to spend on clothes. Then there is Sir Phillip Green who could almost be described as an archetypal sufferer from affluenza; his affliction has squeezed a great company dry, infected the workers' pension pot and jeopardised the future of thousands of loyal employees. I was deeply touched when Sir Phillip, appearing before a Parliamentary Committee, told his unsympathetic interrogator that he had transferred all his assets to Monaco for health reasons and was surprised to discover it was a tax haven. The childlike innocence of this knight of the British Empire almost brings tears to my eyes. But enough of joking! Losing your home, your job, your savings through another's insatiable greed is not a cause for humour.

Which brings me to today's gospel. It had never dawned on me until I was confronted with the task of preaching on the incident how inappropriate was the request that Jesus should sort out the brothers' inheritance. Imagine what our Lord was occupied with at that moment, what his whole mind was concentrated on; he would have been surrounded by needy people, people in the extremity of need - the blind, lame, deaf, dumb, lepers, outcasts, untouchables – stretching out his hands to touch them, goodness flowing from him to the point of exhaustion. If we had been there we would have heard the cries of the sufferers mingled in a strange anthem with the hallelujah's of the healed. Suddenly there is an interruption, a loud voice joins the cries of the afflicted, *Master, my brother has diddled me, do something about it!* Can you think of anything less appropriate at such a moment? He who had raised the dead was being asked to adjudicate on an inheritance.

There is something about this situation that leads me to imagine that the man was not motivated by need but by greed. This cannot have been an isolated instance of Jesus being asked to mediate between quarreling siblings or neighbours, for it was customary for rabbis to become involved in such matters. In this instance Jesus responds not with sympathy to someone with a real grievance but with exasperation, even though he calls him *friend*. You can imagine him throwing up his arms as he exclaims, *Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?* And turning to the crowd he warns, *Be on your guard against all kinds of greed* - I wonder to whom he was pointing when he said this? He then tells a parable which brutally exposes the selfish concerns of the man. It must have been an embarrassing and humiliating experience to be an object of our Lord's scathing attention, to be compared to a rich man whose favourite occupation was hoarding his possessions or spending lavishly

on himself. I wonder did it ring a bell with the importunate man and I wonder what he made of the concluding sentences, ringing like the toll of a funeral bell, *But God said to him, You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?* As the Spanish proverb says, *There are no pockets in a shroud.*

Our Lord, however, does not stop with this solemn warning, he goes on to refer to those who are rich towards God. Rich towards God! I find this extraordinary, almost ridiculous. How can a human being be rich towards God? How can someone as rich even as Croesus give that to God which God does not already possess? Listen to God's voice transmitted through the psalmist:

*I will accept no bull from your house,
nor he-goat from your folds.*

*For every beast of the forest is mine,
the cattle on a thousand hills.*

*I know all the birds of the air,
and all that moves in the field is mine.*

*If I were hungry I would not tell you,
for the world and all that is in it is mine.*

To suggest that I can be rich to such a one as this seems at first sight as ridiculous as if I were to slip a sixpenny piece into the hand of Sir Philip Green with the hope it would help him to buy some fuel for his new £100,000,000 yacht.

Except when I say things like this I am forgetting that God comes to me in disguise: in the outstretched hands of the hungry, in the eloquent eyes of an abused child, in the grief-etched face of a bereaved mother, in the despair of a homeless refugee. All these present me with opportunities of being rich towards God and perhaps even of filling the pockets of my shroud with a few good things.

I'd like to think that the aggrieved brother who cried out to Jesus went home a changed man; but what about all the others who heard Jesus' words, and those to whom Luke passed on this challenging story – all good Christians, I imagine - and what about myself to whom this story has come afresh this morning? You see, one of the questions I've been asking whilst preparing this sermon is, *Am I also a sufferer from affluenza? Am I using the bankers and the tycoons to divert my attention from my own condition? Is this parable addressed as much to me as to that anonymous man so concerned with the family inheritance?*