

The late lamented Spike Milligan once observed: ‘Money may not make you happy, but it does buy you a better class of misery.’

I thought of that insight as I reflected on our Gospel reading for today and in particular the man who came to Jesus asking him to act on his behalf in settling a family dispute. Before we look at the detail of this story, let us just step back for a moment and look at the wider context within which Luke has placed this story (which is told only by Luke) in the Gospel as a whole.

Jesus had been talking to his hearers of the need for bold and fearless witness; the assurance that the God who watches over even the sparrows has a care and concern for them. In words we were using last week, in the context of our thoughts on prayer, his audience was being encouraged to ‘think big’.

Then out of the crowd comes this request: ‘Lord, sort out this problem I am having with my brother over money.’ When you look at the broader context of the Gospel account, you have to ask had the man been listening. Or was he so burdened with his grievance, he could not hear what Jesus was saying. Talk of fearless witness, God’s abiding care simply washed over him as he waited for a chance to voice his complaint.

It is at this point that Jesus turns to the crowd and warns:

‘Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.’

The word Luke uses in the original Greek text, which we have translated as ‘greed’, is *pleonexia*, the same word Paul uses in our Epistle for that ‘greed (which is idolatry)’. *pleonexia* is a greed arising from an obsessive accumulation of wealth.

It is at this point that I find a connection with our contemporary situation. A couple of weeks ago, I alluded to the slogan painted across the hoarding around a now derelict building site in the Docklands:

‘Greed is the knife – and the scars run deep.’

Jesus went on to tell the Parable of the Rich Fool. It is a parable that touches on many of the issues we were thinking about a fortnight ago. How *pleonexia*, an obsessive accumulation of wealth, can lead to a distortion of values in individuals, in society; how the urgent can so easily displace the important in life. In the life of the man in the parable, the business plan, the maximising of output from his land (which in themselves are no bad thing) all begin to cloud his judgement in other things. So, as he surveys his enlarged barns, all crammed with produce from his land, he declares, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ In introducing the parable, Jesus has told his hearers, ‘one’s life does not consist in the abundance of one’s possessions.’ There are values, there are priorities that have no place on a profit and loss account and yet, if we neglect these same values, that same profit and loss account is very much the poorer. On the night he stood down, in his last TV broadcast as Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, the late Terence O’Neill observed of Northern Ireland, with its tremendous tradition of Church attendance, ‘Our religion could have enriched our politics, instead we have allowed our politics to demean our religion.’ By the same token, in the years of our prosperity, our values imbued from our spiritual and cultural heritage should have tempered our use of our wealth; instead wealth and attitudes to wealth began to distort the values of our society and those who controlled our banking institutions. As Spike Milligan might have observed; ‘Money did not bring us happiness, maybe just a better class of misery.’

Our Gospel lesson ends with the warning:

²¹So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.’ *Luke 13:21*

What is this ‘richness towards God’ that the Gospel writer is pointing us towards? I remember on the night of my Institution to Ahoghill; the Mayor of Ballymena, the late Sandy Spence, was one of the platform party. I was later told that a youngster in the Parish had asked him ‘Are you really a millionaire?’ – to which Sandy Spence replied, ‘I’m rich because he cares.’ This morning, in the context of our service, we are welcoming a young baby into the fellowship of the Church in Baptism. His parents, Ola and Jummy, have, as is the custom in Nigeria, thought long and hard about the names and the meaning of the names they are giving their son today. Today this child will receive as his Christian name; Jonathan Oluwanifemi Olayemi Inioluwa. I was particularly taken by their choice of the name Oluwanifemi, which means ‘God loves me’. For, as the Mayor of Ballymena reminded that young child, therein lies our true wealth.

Ola and Jummy have worked hard to prepare a home for their young son. In the years to come they will, as any parent would, seek to provide their son, along with their love, all the physical requirements as he grows up – food, clothing, a comfortable home, an education and of course those treats that have to be part of any child’s growing up. But in bringing Jonathan Oluwanifemi for Baptism this morning they are saying that is not enough. They want for their son that wealth that goes beyond mere possessions. The Pastoral Introduction to the Service of Baptism in the Book of Common Prayer begins, ‘Baptism marks the beginning of a journey with God which continues for the rest of our lives, the first step in our response to God’s love.’

Today, as fellow pilgrims on this life long journey of faith, we welcome this child into the fellowship of the Church, the Body of Christ in this place – a welcome not just for today but for everyday. May this child grow in the faith in which he has been baptised, may what has been said today on his behalf become a reality in his life; that in this young life God may show something of his love in the world in which he will grow up.