

**Sermon for Sunday, August 4th, 2019**  
**Ian Malcolm**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts here be acceptable in thy sight, o God, our strength and our Redeemer.  
Amen.

When I read today's verses from Ecclesiastes, and Luke, and contemplated their references to vanity, I checked my dictionaries and realised that they contained two basic definitions of the word. The first, more familiar definition of vanity describes a human attitude - "excessive pride in, or admiration of, one's own appearance or achievements., The second, which the speaker in Ecclesiastes uses, describes the quality of worthlessness or futility- the condition in which the objectives of human effort and wisdom are revealed to be meaningless.

These verses are spoken by the persona of a wise, great, wealthy king, for a long time thought to be Solomon, who has come to believe that vanity, 'a striving after wind' is at the core of human life. The speaker in Ecclesiastes, , says "It is an unhappy business that God has given to the children of man to be busy with." The unhappy business is that of striving to gain material and spiritual achievements which must inevitably be left to those who come after. The speaker gives his heart up to despair "because 'a person who has toiled with wisdom and knowledge and skill must leave all to be enjoyed by a person who did not toil for it.'" Even in the night time of attempted sleep, and rest, a person's mind isn't eased, because the sense of the uselessness of one's efforts and achievements is always present, always relived. This seems to me to be a despairing vision of life. It's not a reminder that we ought to be less vain - it's a surrender to the idea that despite one's own efforts and accomplishments, life, or the world, has no distinct meaning or purpose. It's the source of depression, described two millennia later by F. Scott Fitzgerald when he wrote "at three o'clock in the morning, a forgotten package has the same tragic importance as a death sentence, . . . and in a real dark night of the soul it is always three o'clock in the morning, day after day."

Psalm 107 is an antidote to that nihilistic despair. The psalmist speaks of people who felt the way the speaker in Ecclesiastes feels, wandering in desert wastes, finding no way to a city to dwell in; hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted within them. Psalm 107 tells the story of God gathering them in, making them whole, healing them with love. The psalm expresses God's longing to care for us all.. It is the song for all of us, for whom God's "compassion grows warm and tender". God leads the wanderers - us - into community where hunger and thirst are satisfied. Dust and dirt are wiped. Bodies are made clean. Sparkle returns to the hollow eye. I can imagine the speaker of Ecclesiastes, for all his wealth, power, and wisdom, being redeemed in this way from the spiritual hunger and thirst caused by his vision of the vanity, the worthlessness, of human effort.

Luke's description of Christ's parable of the Rich Fool, returns us to the concept of vanity, and to its more familiar definition- excessive pride in, or admiration of, one's own appearance or achievements. And this self-centred pride is coupled with a focus with which we're all familiar - a vision of the value of material wealth, and its accumulation. In our world, many who hear the parable might wonder: Why is the rich farmer called a fool? He appears to be a wise and responsible person. He's successful. His land has produced so abundantly that he does not have enough storage space in his barns for the rich harvest. So he plans to demolish and enlarge his barns to store all his grain and goods. Then he will have ample food and riches set aside for the future and will be all set to enjoy his golden years.

Isn't this what we are encouraged to strive for? Isn't it wise and responsible to save for the future? The rich farmer has worked hard and saved wisely. Now he can sit back, relax, and enjoy the fruits of his labour.

But of course there is one very important thing the rich man has not planned for -- his reckoning with God. And God says to him, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" (Luke 12:20)

The rich farmer is a fool not because he is wealthy or because he saves for the future, and we know that he's not depressed – he hasn't even thought about others inheriting his bounty. But he is profoundly foolish, because he appears to consider only himself, not thinking at all about sharing his bounty with others, and because he believes that his abundant possessions will secure and make comfortable his life.

In this parable, when the rich man speaks he speaks only to himself, and only of himself: "What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?" "I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry'" (Luke 12:17-19).

The rich man's land has produced bountifully, yet he expresses no gratitude to God or to the workers who have helped him plant and harvest this bumper crop. He has more grain and goods in storage than he could ever hope to use, yet seems to have no thought of sharing it with others, and no thought of whether God might require that generosity of him. He is blind to the fact that his life is not his own to secure, that his life belongs to God, and that God can demand it back at any time.

The rich man learns the same truth that had rankled the speaker in Ecclesiastes: -- quite simply, that you can't take it with you. All that we work so hard for in life will end up in someone else's hands, and as Ecclesiastes puts it, "Who knows whether they will be wise or foolish? Yet they will be master of all for which I toiled and used my wisdom under the sun."

We all recognise the temptation of materialism – prestige, and apparent security. But we learn that no matter how much we have, we are always aware of things we don't have. We are bombarded by marketing wizards whose job it is to make us want, and believe that our wants are needs, and never be satisfied. Like the rich farmer, we are tempted to think that having large amounts of money and possessions stored up will redeem us. Sooner or later, however, we learn that no amount of wealth or property can secure our lives. No amount of wealth can protect us from a genetically inherited disease, for instance, or from a tragic accident. No amount of wealth, prestige, power can sustain the happiness of our families, or our communities. Wealth and property can easily drive wedges between family members, as we know from our experience in literature of King Lear as well as the real-life stories of families like the Stronachs, and the Olands. It is not that God doesn't want us to save for retirement or future needs. It is not that God doesn't want us to "eat, drink, and be merry" and enjoy what God has given us. We know from the Gospels that Jesus spent time breaking bread and drinking wine with others, savouring life. But he wanted us to acknowledge the necessity of focusing, not on ourselves and our passing desires, but on God, and on our neighbours, on God's mission to bless and redeem the world. Our lives and possessions are not our own. They belong to God. We are merely stewards of them for the time God has given us on this earth. We rebel against this truth because we want to be in control of our lives and our possessions.

But the truth, the good news, is that our future is secure beyond all measure if we only recognise that all that we are and all that we have, take their meaning from our adherence to God's vision, and to Christ's charges that we love others as ourselves, and that we do unto others as we would have them do unto us.

As we consider the sense of hopelessness expressed by the speaker in Ecclesiastes, the way that despair is healed by God in the Psalm, and the mistaken self-satisfaction of the farmer described by Christ and recounted in Luke, we are compelled to wonder:

What must we do with the gifts God has given to us? Our possessions provide our daily bread but that's not their purpose because we have more than we need for our daily bread. So for what purpose has He given us these things but to use them in loving consideration of others?

The wise king was filled with despair by the perceived loss of control over his works, and his wealth. The rich farmer discovered in the hour of his death that he had been led by vanity away from the true purpose of existence. And we, who have contemplated these lessons must ask ourselves now, What must we do with God's gifts to us? What will we do to give thanks for God's steadfast love, for his wonderful works? Let us move beyond the constraints of vanity in both its definitions to search for, and enact in our lives, our answers to these questions.