

18th Sunday - Year C (2013)

Forty Martyrs'; St Bede's

What gives this life meaning? What makes life, at times so very hard for most, worth living? That is the question our readings ask us to ponder this morning / evening. Here in the affluent West life for most of us for most of the time is comfortable. Compared to how most people have lived through most of history, we are privileged: free from war and its effects, free from disease, free from extreme poverty. But sometimes we are pulled up short and faced with the most significant questions of life and death. A bolt of lightning from a clear blue sky forces the starkest, unforgiving questions upon us: what is the point? Why are we here? What comes next? What is the meaning of life? My life? The life cut tragically short before it has really begun?

Eleven days ago I led a funeral service in the Chapel of Great Ormond Street Hospital for a baby who had lived only ten days. All had been well for two days and baby was at home. Suddenly there was a problem. Aunty, a GP, was there and she resuscitated baby and he was quickly moved to the children's hospital. A problem was diagnosed which had no solution. Baby died in his parents loving arms. I have known mummy since she was a toddler; I married the parents and I led the prayers at the simple, awful, love-fuelled funeral.

How do you find meaning in such a devastating event? It is every parents', grandparents' nightmare. Words swiftly dissolve, empty as they are being spoken. Was this life a mistake? A tragic error? One of those things, get over it, move on?

The question of life's meaning is posed both by the cynical 'Preacher' who declares all to be vanity – waste, emptiness; and in the Gospel-story of man whose life is utterly empty, despite appearances.

The man in the parable is the first century equivalent of a contemporary 'fat cat'. A man who, like some bankers and BBC official of today, wants to accumulate funds and an ever larger pension pot, and does not care that others are put in penury as a consequence. He is 'a rich man'; in the Bible, you'll remember, that is generally a code for: 'he is a **greedy** man'.

He has a bumper harvest. He is then, a man with ample land, a large estate. This, in the political-economic climate of this period, probably meant that he had gained his wealth by lending to peasants and, when they could not repay he had taken possession of their land.

The land of course belongs to God. And God is responsible for the bumper harvest. What the rich man should do, in thanksgiving to God and in his own best interests, is to share his good fortune with the less fortunate. He should become a benefactor, a patron, to the needy of the village. Then they, his clients, would endlessly praise his

kindness. "Never has there been a more generous master", they would say. His name would be forever blessed. And his honour, the great value in this culture, his honour would soar and the village would forever be in his debt (moral not financial). But he does not do this. And we knew he would not do this because he is a rich, that is, a greedy man. And so he keeps all his good fortune, his increased wealth, to himself; and he builds bigger barns to mock the hungry of the village.

Notice how he consults only with himself. He speaks to himself - because he has no one else to speak to. In a world where one's identity, one's person-hood came from the group, the community of the extended family, and the village, he speaks only to himself.

This rich, greedy man is a solitary in a communal world. He plans to eat, drink and make merry; but he will do so alone in a society where nobody ate, drank or made merry alone. Remember how the shepherd who found the lost sheep called in friends and neighbours. "Rejoice with me," he said. The woman who lost the coin and recovered it invited her neighbours in to party. The father of the lost and returned son had the fatted calf killed - a banquet for the whole village. That was the way. This rich, pathetic, lonely wretch dines alone.

Then God speaks. God speaks in a Gospel-parable only here. And God says, "You fool." The fool in the Book of Psalms is the one who 'says in his heart there is no God'. This man has acted in every way as if there is no God. He has mocked God - and God will not be mocked.

We might think the man dies of a heart attack. His rich living has given him high cholesterol levels and thickening arteries. Perhaps. One fascinating interpretation sees his death as a result of the action of the poor peasants whom he has robbed and then insulted by his selfish behaviour. They take the law to themselves and destroy the man who has made himself their enemy, by condemning them to further poverty through his limitless greed. So they burn his home with him in it. They take back what they believe is theirs. The man is doubly a fool; he acted improperly and mocked God; and he stayed in the area where the poor were seething against him instead of getting out and back to the safety of the big town. His grim fate is all his own doing. Perhaps the idea of a revolt of the peasantry is reading too much into the story - but it makes sense. It is the sort of thing which did and does happen.

The man is a fiction, a figure in a story; but there were many such men in the ancient world as there are many such people now. Do their lives have meaning, significance. The Bible's clear answer is 'No'. Seen from God's perspective, the man for all his wealth counts for nothing.

In contrast that baby's life has great significance. He was born in love; lovingly carried for forty weeks; welcomed lovingly; and when his condition and his fate was known his parents thought to keep his name alive by creating a fund in his name to

help others like him. More than ten thousand pounds was received in the few days before his funeral service. So many will be grateful to him, though they will never know him. He just dropped by, but that drop will cause ripples that will spread far. And from God's perspective he is a saint, one of God's holy ones, through his total innocence and the grace of baptism.

Victor Frankl was a survivor of the Holocaust who spent much of his long life pondering the question of life's meaning in the shadow of that horror which saw six million men, women and children murdered. His best known book, is called "*Man's Search for Meaning*". There he wrote:

Do not judge a biography by its length,  
nor by the number of pages in it;  
judge it by the richness of its content.  
Sometimes those unfinished are the most poignant...  
Do not judge a song by its duration,  
nor by the number of its notes.  
Judge it by the way it touches and lifts the soul.  
Sometimes those unfinished are among the most beautiful...  
And when something has enriched your life,  
and when its melody lingers on in your heart  
is it unfinished? Or is it endless?

"All is vanity" said the Preacher, cynically. "All which is not love", is surely our reply.