

St. Ninian's Parish Church

Sunday 11th August 2019

Luke 12: 32 - 40

Thieves are about during the Edinburgh Festivals, watch your valuables when you are in the city centre warned the Police this week. There have been many pickpocket incidents, and Operation Arable, the Police's dedicated initiative to tackle all forms of acquisitive crime is ongoing.

Thieves also appear in our short Gospel reading this morning, twice, at the end of each section that we read.

Have no fear, little flock; for your Father has chosen to give you the Kingdom. Sell your possessions and give in charity. Provide for yourselves purses that do not wear out, and never-failing treasure in heaven, where no thief can get near it ... for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.¹

And then, later on, Jesus said,

... remember, if the householder had known what time the thief was coming he would not have let his house be broken into. Hold yourselves ready, then, because the Son of Man will come at the time you least expect him.²

The appearance thieves twice in the reading, lends its theme a sense of inevitability: probably just as much in our day as in Jesus', if you have something that is worth taking, someone will always be trying to take it from you. So, what are you to do? In Edinburgh the advice from the Police concerns mobile phones in particular, which are an attractive target for thieves; take a note of your phone's serial number and install a tracking app, say the Police.

For Jesus, the advice was, value things that can't be taken, and be prepared for the arrival of the thief.

Elsewhere in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus tells a story of a man who didn't do these things; he valued too highly his possessions, even the life he possessed. The man was a farmer, who enjoyed a bumper harvest. What did he do with his surplus crop? Did he put it on the market to lower the price so that everyone could eat well? No, he built bigger barns to store it all, inflating the price so that he could enjoy untold riches. But, it didn't work out that way, for that very night a thief came and stole away the man's life. His bumper harvest was now worth nothing too him, and no one held him in good opinion.

For good reason my wife is reading a biography of the late 19th century philanthropist Andrew Carnegie who for a time was the richest man in the world before he died in 1919. This biography is an 800-page tome (I gave it to her, so she feels obliged to read it). It is interesting to learn about Andrew Carnegie's life: where he came from; how well he did at school; what type of person he was; how he earned his money; even how tall he was – he was only 5 foot 2.

But, the truth is that few people would bother to read 800 pages about Andrew Carnegie's life had he not given his wealth away. What makes him an interesting person is not an inventory of all the possessions he owned, his material wealth, but rather the nature of his character, and what he gave away; the equivalent of 75 billion dollars in today's money.

¹ Luke 12: 32 - 34

² Luke 12: 39 - 40

That is true not just of the wealthiest, but of us all. When the thief comes in the night to steal your life away, and an account is made of your life when mourners gather to remember it, few will be interested in listening to your C.V. read, or in hearing about how much money you had in the bank when you died.

When giving eulogies at funerals, to this day I have never once mentioned or been asked to mention the size of someone's house, the engine capacity of their car, the fashionable names of their designer clothes, or the value of the art on their walls. It is true that the jobs people did are often mentioned at their funerals, but when talking about that job, how much the person enjoyed their work trumps their seniority in the firm every time. Power and status carry a lot less weight than likeability at your funeral.

What people do want to hear about, what moves people to tears, what creates vivid pictures in the minds of mourners are three things: what kind of person the deceased was in life; their relationships to others; and what kind of attitude they had to the world in general. Or, to put that another way, what is interesting about you at the end of the day, is how much money you left behind, but the extent to which you came to love and respect yourself; the extent to which you loved and respected other people, and the extent to which you loved and respected God: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’; and, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’”³

Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. Hold yourself ready for the Son of Man will come at a time when you least expect him.

Just before this reading, Jesus had been encouraging his followers not to worry about material things: clothes to cover their bodies, food to keep them alive. Life is about more than clothes or food, he said.

Of course, I'm not saying that keeping yourself clothed and fed - and keeping those who depend on you clothed and fed - is not something to worry about. Far too many people in this world, in this country, even in this city are poor enough to have to worry about where their next meal is coming from and how to clothe their children.

Jesus was always on the side of those who were poor and their worries, and wanted us to be so too - *Sell your possessions and give in charity* - but, he also didn't want people to believe that others care how expensive your clothes are, or what fine restaurants you eat in, or how many rooms are in your house, or what the engine capacity is of your car. Don't worry about those things, no one cares.

That doesn't mean people aren't envious of your riches: they usually want to 'keep up with the Joneses when they see your finery; they might even try to steal your things from you if they can't afford them, but don't mistake envy, jealousy, or theft for respect, admiration or love.

What's more, and what's more important, not only are other people not likely to love, respect or admire you for your wealth, God doesn't love, respect or admire you for your wealth either. God doesn't not love you because you have a lot of treasure in your purse, thank God! After all, if he did, and it was stolen, or lost in a financial crash, or if you lost your job, where would your self-worth be then?

Far better to trade fleeting, material, riches, which can wear out, or be lost, or be taken, for treasure in heaven: that is, a faith that values you for who you are; a faith that values you for

³ Luke 10:27

the quality of your relationships with others, and that cares about those who few material possessions; a faith that values you for your desire to experience this life in all its fullness.

Even then, don't put too much value on your life in this world in all its fulness, for there is a thief coming to take it away as well – even the treasure that is life is not safe. But, don't worry, so long as you are prepared you will find that God loves you not just because you are alive on earth today, but forever and ever. Provide for yourselves purses that do not wear out, and never-failing treasure in heaven, where no thief can get near it.

This morning there are three people here who later in the service will be making a commitment, a public one, to invest some of their treasure: their treasure of time, money and their lives in heaven because their hearts have been moved to do so. That investment of their time, treasure and life is no small thing, it is precious.

James and Cheryl for example both have young children, and they know that they need to put food on the table, a roof over their heads, and provide a lot of time in the wellbeing of their family, but they know also that the value of life cannot be measured by these material things.

And so today, having already spent a fair bit of time during the Spring attending a new members course, they are committing themselves to their belief that their lives depend on the love God has for them, the love they have for others, and their attitude to the world around them; treasure that if spiritually nourished will never wear out.

And they will take promises, as we all have, to support each other in the nourishing of the treasure we possess. For this treasure of love is not visible, it cannot be stored, or bought, or sold, or valued or traded; it needs to be believed in. As the writer of the Hebrews said in the first of our readings this morning,

And what is faith? Faith gives substance to our hopes, and makes certain of realities we do not see.⁴

Faith gives substance to our hopes: no longer do we have to despair in life, for we have a hope that if we believe in loving each other, ourselves, the world God created then together we can overcome the material challenges that this life presents us with.

Faith makes certain of realities that we cannot see: no longer need we rely on material things that wear out and perish, now we know that those things we cannot see have a heavenly quality that lasts forever. Indeed, never mind faith, even research shows that life experiences rather than possessions; good relationships rather than status and power; and serving others rather than selfishly seeking our own success is what makes people happiest and life more fulfilled.

The writer of the Hebrews went on to describe the life of Abraham and Sarah, who as an elderly couple, in faith, left their home, their possessions, their material goods and travelled to an alien land where no one knew them and where they were of no particular value to anyone. And God raised their eyes to the heavens and asked them to believe, to have faith that they would have descendants as numerous as the stars in the heavens. Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

⁴ Hebrews 11: 1