

St. Ninian's Parish Church

Sunday 6th October 2019

Galatians 5: 16 – 25; Luke 12: 13 – 21

It is a tale with a tragic ending. After pursuing a life of wealth, abundance and privilege, when it finally arrives it can't be enjoyed for, as our Gospel reading says, "...this very night you must surrender your life..."¹.

How did it all go so wrong for the rich man whose land yielded heavy crops – the subject of our Gospel reading this morning? How did it all go so wrong? After all, all he probably only wanted what everyone wants, wealth, abundance, privilege, yet when it came, it came with tragedy attached. How did it all go wrong?

"I just want what everyone wants. I just seem to have a harder time getting it," says Judy Garland in *Judy*, a film about her life released last Tuesday. "I just want what everyone wants. I just seem to have a harder time getting it."

Judy Garland was a world-famous actress, singer, dancer; an international star whose career took off when she portrayed Dorothy Gayle in the film adaptation of *The Wizard of Oz*. She was 17 at the time, but she already had a career lasting over 14 years, having first appeared on stage at the age of two and a-half.

Judy Garland's life, which started so brightly, had a tragic ending. Her career began at an early age, but her life ended at an early age also. She was forty-seven when she died in 1969. The film focuses on that final year when, in an attempt to resurrect a career that had been hollowed out by addiction, insecurity, loneliness and stardom, Judy Garland undertook a limited run of performances at *Talk of the Town*, a famous cabaret club in London's West End. This attempt to resurrect her career failed, and that same year Judy Garland died from an accidental overdose of sleeping pills.

How did it all go so wrong? After all, all she only wanted what everyone wants, yet when it came, it came with tragedy attached. How did it all go so wrong?

The film offers an answer to that question. It all went wrong from the very beginning. She was signed by the Hollywood studio Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer at the age of 15, and from that point on was subjected to the mistreatment that Hollywood inflicts on those who are, in particular, young and female.

It is that story of abuse that dominated the rest of her career, and life. When, as a young star, she did work up the nerve to complain about her treatment, the studio boss, Louise B. Mayer threatened her with expulsion from show business. When he did so he instilled in Judy Garland a fear of failure that eventually paralysed her as an adult.

How did it all go wrong? It all went wrong because the relationship that Judy Garland had with the industry she worked for, and the other people who worked in it, was an abusive one. She couldn't break free of that relationship because she was more afraid of the consequences of doing so than she was of the consequences of staying.

Fear or worry seems such a pedestrian reason for tragedy. In the tragic story of the rich man who finally makes it in life, so much so that he could 'take life easy, eat, drink, and enjoy'²

¹ Luke 12: 20

² Luke 12: 19

himself, we are led to believe that his folly came as a consequence of greed and selfishness. Surely, that greed and selfishness couldn't have been caused by something we all might fall prey to, worry and fear?

We might think so, but immediately following this parable, Jesus says to his disciples,
I bid you put away anxious thoughts about food to keep you alive and clothes to cover your body. Life is more than food, the body more than clothes ... Is there one among you who by anxious thought can add a day to his life?

This parable about a rich man who builds bigger barns when his ship comes in, is revealed not so much to be about a greedy, abusive, powerful man who lacks generosity, but more about a fearful, anxious man who lacks courage. The tragedy of his life wasn't a consequence of the selfish hoarding of his wealth, he was just saving for his retirement – as we all do. The tragedy came when he was so captured by his worries for the future that he believed abundant life came in big barns.

But, as we have seen in this rich man's life, and in Judy Garland's life, fear of the future, however it is instilled in us, often determines our choices in the present, and is not something that comes free of charge. Fear doesn't come without a price attached.

The parable we read began with a brother approaching Jesus asking him to arbitrate between him and his family over a matter of inheritance – the brother was afraid, was worrying that he was missing out. Jesus dismissed the request with a warning that in fact it is better to be the victim of an injustice than to fall into the trap of thinking that abundance of life is to be found in material possessions.

Beware! Be on your guard against greed of every kind, for even when someone has more than enough, his wealth does not give him life, Jesus says to the brother. Beware of greed of every kind; in this case, beware of the greed of the kind that is brought about by worry and fear.

Even as we convert our fears in to saving for our future and investing in a pension, we shouldn't make the mistake that this material investment can save us and offer us a life that feels whole and abundant. Material possessions cannot do that, and the more we worry about them, the more we are distracted from what truly offers abundant life. The more we worry about our material lives, the more we are distracted from investing in our spiritual lives. The more we reap a harvest of our fears, the less we store up the harvest of those things that Paul in his letter to the Galatians says can give abundant life: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness and self-control.³

Today, we celebrate our Harvest Festival. The history of a Harvest Festival is by definition the result of people being worried and afraid. If people weren't worried that the harvest might not happen, if they weren't worried that there might not be enough food to go around, then they wouldn't celebrate when the harvest arrived.

But, it is precisely at this point, when the harvest is gathered, that we need to be courageous and not give in to our worries or fears. It is at this point in our lives that fear and worry have the biggest chance of destroying our lives rather than helping us to protect our future selves.

Just as Judy Garland found that it was exactly at the point when she was celebrating the harvest of success and fame that she was most vulnerable to the fear that success and fame

³ Galatians 5: 22

could be taken away from her so that she would be seen as a failure, so we too, just as we are celebrating our harvest are vulnerable to the fear that this harvest might not endure.

It was precisely at the point when he might come into an inheritance, that the brother in the Gospel story was most vulnerable to the fear that he might be swindled out of it. It was precisely at the moment when the harvest came in that the rich man was most vulnerable to the fear that he might lose it, and that made him spend what little time he had left on earth building bigger barns.

It is common in the Church of Scotland to see congregations, precisely at the time they receive a legacy, or money from a union of congregations, or when they realise they are reasonably well off, give in to fear and worry and start saving for the rainy day when the roof might fall in, while their congregation dwindles around them.

It is important to think of the future, of course, but never forget that it is precisely at the moment when you feel most secure, that you are at your most vulnerable. The good news is that through the ministry of Jesus Christ, God is telling us that abundant life is there for us if we have also the courage to overcome our fears. If we don't, then we might end up saying with Judy Garland that we just wanted what everyone wants, but it always seemed that we had a harder time getting it.

If, at the start of her career Judy Garland thought that what everyone wants to harvest from life is fame and fortune - so much so that as an adult she was paralysed by her fear of losing these things - then at the end of her life she realised, tragically too late, that what everyone wants – even if they don't know it – is something quite different – love. As the rich man learned, at the most crucial moments in life, the only way to find the harvest that everyone truly wants, is to stop worrying about the future.