

Hosea 11:1-11

Ps 107: 1-9; 43

Colossians 3: 1-11

Luke 12: 13-21

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Gracious God open our hearts to the good news, that we might hear and truly live. Amen.

Have you noticed that the Canberra Times has changed the name of the Death Notices? On Saturdays (at least), that section is now called 'Tributes and Celebrations'. Is this another sign that we are living in a death-denying culture?

Death and, we are told, taxes are both inevitable but we seem to spend a lot of energy as a society trying to avoid both of them. Some taxes we might just skirt around, but death no – it comes to us all. Although it seems often to be regarded as a failure of medical science, it is as inevitable as the heat of summer and the cold of winter here in Canberra.

Inevitability is much better faced, acknowledged and dealt with than denied. Canberra is both hot and cold. We could live here as if it were only ever winter. Indeed there may well be times, particularly in August each year, when you might be tempted to think that it will only ever be winter. But that would not be wise. It would mean being radically unprepared for much of the year and over prepared for a short section of it. Plenty of jumpers, boots, hats and raincoats but no t-shirts, sandals or lightweight clothing.

And we can choose to live our lives as if we will never die, but again that would not be wise, leading us to twin follies: the folly of deferring all sorts of things, knowing that there will always be a 'later', and the second folly of putting all our energy now into securing a comfortable future.

Today's Gospel reading points to the second folly: the folly of focussing on the future at the expense of the present. The rich man's response to abundance is to sock it away, to put all his attention into making sure that he can have a good time, as he sees it, in the future. But what about now? Why run off on a building project instead of relaxing, eating, drinking and enjoying himself now?

'Soul', he says, 'you will have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink and be merry.' But he already has some barns to store his harvest – the ones he is proposing to replace with bigger, newer, brighter versions. Why commit himself to a building project which will only, as anybody who has ever watched 'Grand Designs' could tell him, will only bring stress and grief as he endures the first century equivalent of waiting months for the glass to arrive, the planning permission to go through and the finance to?

What about all the intangible things of life like friendship and love? What about praising God for the abundance of the harvest?

As we look to the future, what truly matters to us? Has it to do with God, with our human relationships, or is it about having enough material things? Jesus generally gives the material world a bad press – not, I believe, because such things are bad in themselves, but because we humans have a tendency to lose perspective in relation to them and to put our hearts on things which are just transitory, which are ephemeral and incidental, losing sight of the eternal values of love, compassion, mercy and truth.

The Lord's Prayer seeks to put our physical needs in their proper place – the line 'give us today our daily bread' is a prayer seeking enough. Another translation renders the line as 'give us bread for our journey'. Not too much, not too little. Just enough. Our desire should be that there is enough, and that we can be secure in the knowledge that there will be enough. Extra is excess and a distraction. As we try to manage it and salt it away for a rainy day, it takes our focus and attention away from the present, and from the truly important tasks that we have here – to love God, and to love our neighbour as ourselves.

Today sees the end of National Missing Persons Week. The lives of the families and friends of those who go missing are changed forever by the experience. In the years I was at All Saints in Ainslie we worked each year with the AFP's Missing Persons' Unit to host a service to marking the beginning of National Missing Persons' Week. Year after year we heard the pain-filled stories of families who had been waiting weeks, months and years to hear from a missing loved one. In many ways it is like losing someone through death and yet it is without the finality of death. For them, however, hope remains, in some corner of the heart: hope that the missing person will turn up again one day. Grieving cannot follow its normal course. The loss remains open-ended.

How well they know that life can change in an instant! That every plan you have laid, every imagining you have about the future becomes null and void.

Such experiences and today's reading challenge us to examine our own assumptions and the way in which we are living. What are the kinds of wealth that we are seeking to accumulate? Is it to do with money, or material possessions? Or are we seeking to invest all our emotional energy into one person, into one relationship – a partner, a child? Are we workaholics, investing all our energy and effort into a particular task and losing our perspective as a result?

Knowing that we will die, and knowing too that the time and manner of our death is largely unpredictable, how then shall we live? And, having answered that question, do we actually do it?

Does the reality of our life match the way we believe we should be living? Many of us put off the things we truly want to do in order to secure a future over which we have no control. The future may be utterly different from the way we imagine it will be. Indeed it probably will be utterly different from the

way we imagine it will be. The rich man in the parable today had plenty of wherewithal to eat, drink and enjoy himself in the present and yet his concern was to store it up so that he could eat, drink and be merry in the future. How sensible was this?

How many of us put off truly engaging with life now, fondly imagining that we will do it once we have bought a house, once the kids leave home, once we have that promotion at work, once we've lost weight, once we've tidied up the garage ... and so it goes on.

As we read the gospels, it seems that one of the primary calls of the Christian is to live mindfully, intentionally, day by day. Focussing on the here and now, living each moment. This can be hard for Westerners to achieve. Many of us are the genetic descendants of Northern Europeans who needed to have an eye to surviving harsh winters by making adequate provision for them. All our genes tell us to plan for the future, to make sure there will be enough to get through the hard times.

This is not necessarily wrong – that is not the point of today's gospel passage. The question is how we do it: whether we are losing what is precious about the moment, about the present, in our focus on the future. Whether we are compromising our beliefs, our values, our relationships in the present, for the sake of a future which may never come. That is Jesus' ultimate challenge to us – to live each moment as we are called to live. Much of the Gospel teaching is about this very point.

Life is not about the year after next, it is about today. Today's Prayer on the back of the Weekly Bulletin expresses it beautifully:

Living God, open our hearts to the real treasures in life:  
may we seek the love that lasts,  
the song that echoes,  
and the life everlasting.  
Open our hearts to the Christ,  
the Spirit of life,  
and you, the Creator of all –  
the Eternal One.

Amen.