

Wealth and Riches

As some of you know, an ambition I hope to fulfil before I die, the sole item on my bucket list in fact, is to walk from my front door here in Waterlooville to Santiago using the Pilgrim's Way and the Camino. I have now reached Oxted in Surrey and found that, near Reigate, the path took me through a rather unusual estate, Gatton Park, with a big house at the centre of it and surrounding grounds landscaped by Capability Brown. The house is now a school, and the estate belongs to the National Trust but was originally given to his steward by Henry VI in 1450 in return for helping to arrange his marriage. Henry made the estate a borough which meant that it could send



a member to Parliament, or in this case, two members.

Gatton Park before the fire that destroyed it in 1934. It was rebuilt on a more modest scale by the then owner, Sir Jeremiah Colman, of mustard fame, and became a school in 1948

Gatton Park became one of the so called 'rotten boroughs' because, although it had a church and a few buildings, it was a village of only about twelve families, yet it had the privilege of electing two members of Parliament. Not that the twelve families had any say or any vote, only the gentry had that privilege. So, it was the owner of the house alone who chose two MPs who could represent his interests in Parliament. This gave whoever owned the

house immense power and when the estate came up for sale in the late 1820s, the new buyer, Lord Monson, paid way over the market value of the property in order to gain influence and power in the land. Monson bought the estate for £100,000, probably well over £100m in terms of equivalent property value today and more than twice its true value at the time. Unfortunately for him, two years later, the Reform Bill abolished the borough of Gattton and with it the privilege of parliamentary representation. Overnight Lord Monson lost all his political power and half the value of his property.

This reminded me of the story of the man in today's Gospel who had spent his life building up goods and assets for himself and then, on top, had a sensational harvest which he set about hoarding so as to be able to indulge himself on a grand scale for many years to come. "Fool!" Jesus calls him in uncharacteristically harsh tone because he knows the man will die this very night and all his selfish plotting will come to absolutely nothing. So Jesus warns his listeners, ‘

Watch, and be on your guard against avarice of any kind, for a man's life is not made secure by what he owns, even when he has more than he needs... So it is when a man stores up treasure for himself in place of making himself rich in the sight of God.

This is exactly the kind of human vanity and hubris condemned by the world-weary preacher in the first reading today. A point which is so often made even in our avaricious times is that true riches have nothing to do with how much you own, how much you earn or how much you are worth. Catholic writer, Jack McArdle, puts it well. He writes:

It took me many years to distinguish between being rich and being wealthy. I was confusing riches with money. I didn't understand that riches and richness has nothing to do with money. As a family, I thought we were fairly poor, but it was many years later when I discovered just how rich we were. When I came to work with people who were wealthy, and I discovered just how poor they were, it was quite an eye-opener for me. (Jack McArdle, *And That's the Gospel Truth*, Dublin, The Columba Press, 2000 p.179)

Make yourself rich in the sight of God, Jesus advises. Elsewhere he teaches: Do not store up treasures for yourselves on earth, where moths and woodworms destroy them and thieves can break in and steal. But store up treasures for yourselves in heaven, where neither moth nor woodworms

destroy them and thieves cannot break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

‘Where your treasure is there will your heart be also’. That’s a pretty challenging statement in a week when a woman is given a life sentence for killing her two little daughters for getting in the way of her social life, but it’s also a timely reminder to each one of us too to take a long hard look at where our values **truly** lie and what **really** matters most to us.