

## Vanity of Vanities

For sale: 42 foot, 100” wide with leather and wood paneling throughout. It featured a 400 horsepower Cummins Class A diesel engine. Despite the enticing headline this was no boat, but a Monaco Mandalay Motor home which listed for over a quarter of a million dollars when it was new back in 2006. Demurely affixed to the rear bumper next to the diesel exhaust a carefully lettered sticker read: “We are spending the kid’s inheritance.”

Some folks like me find this story humorous and playful; Serious people think it insensitive and self-centered. You get to decide. Research shows that more and more Third Agers are adopting this philosophy—sometimes for very sound financial and social reasons. You will not have any trouble imagining why so many come to this conclusion.

Some people see bequests as rewards and if they have no heirs to bail out they reward themselves instead. Even very generous people say to themselves: “Why have I done all this saving and work to leave a generous bequest to a) ungrateful, sorry children who b) never learned the value of hard work or c) only cared about me for my money” or similar kinds of notions. Hundreds of books and movies feature this meme! Along with the teacher, son of David we read this morning they lament: “What’s the point, it is all in vain.”

The writer of Ecclesiastes has called attention to this despair or cynicism for over 24 centuries in the famous rhetorical phrase: “Vanity of vanities, everything is in vain.”

He uses the word we translate as “vanity” to mean empty, useless, illusory. He does not mean that things we tend to care about are bad. He wants to remind us that our investment in them may fool us into thinking they are as important as we would like them to be.

The pastor announced a meeting of the board immediately following the morning service. As the group gathered, they noticed a visitor who had never attended their church before had joined them.

“My friend,” asked the pastor, “did you understand that this is a meeting of the board?”

“Yes,” said the visitor, “and after that service, I’m about as bored as you can get!”

The young curate visited Mrs. Got Rocks in the hospital. His palms were sweating and he asked the matron, “Would it be OK if I said a little prayer.” She responded: “If it makes you feel better young man!”

Vanity of vanity, all is vanity.

Just as we expect a lot from our labor and saving, we may expect a lot of public worship. We do invest in the notion that it is someone’s job to make worship thrilling, entertaining, spiritually enriching, easy on the ears, the wallet and comfortable to sit through.

A couple of weeks ago a visitor in another parish said to me with great enthusiasm: “Oh, Father Courtney, I stayed awake during your whole sermon.” Vanity of vanities, all is vanity.

In the plain light of day, a lot of what we work hard at may just be, a “vanity of vanities” or “utter futility” along with everything else!

When the author of Ecclesiastes speaks of everything as “a colossal frustration” he does not in any way suggest that creation is in itself a bad thing; such an idea is completely foreign to the Hebrew Bible. Rather, the author is drawing a line in the sand between human expectations and the way things really are.

New York was aghast at the dark drama surrounding Brooke Astor, the 104-year-old philanthropist and socialite. Her grandson sued his own father, Mrs. Astor’s only son, for not providing for Grandma’s needs. Her son was shocked by the charges. Has her son been withholding necessary care and looking after his interests instead? Or does it all boil down to a disagreement about the kind of care a woman with Alzheimer’s disease truly needs?

According to lawyers and health care workers who care for the elderly, such dilemmas are becoming more and more common. The final years of life are often weighed with escalating health costs that can either drain an inheritance from adult children (most with far fewer assets than an Astor heir) or threaten to sink them financially.

For most of us who are bored or cynical about life, the challenge may be mostly in our expectations and who we expect to fulfill them for us.

I always feel proud of people who tell me that they don't go to church for the clergy, but to worship God. If the clergy get in the way, these folks simply keep on keeping on, pray for their clergy and keep on talking with God. If the clergy are useful, they count it as a bonus!

Most of us really do rely on someone else to do an awful lot for us to make us happy, uncynical and content. This is vanity, we are looking in the wrong place. Our own happiness is our own concern. Each of us will be as happy and content as we decide to be.

One of my neighbors was unhappy with our moving van driver's dog. The doggie had been in the truck all day and probably looked longingly at my neighbor's lawn for relief. Our driver reacted to a verbal warning from our neighbor saying "I am going to move somewhere in Texas where you drive your truck up on the grass and no one will care.

Our driver knew how to make himself and his dog happy. Happiness is not a vanity. It is usually the product of a grateful heart attuned to God's current gifts and confidently awaiting those that are to come.