

Thinking Things Through



PITCHING YOUR TENT

As I write this in early June my normal route to work has been disrupted for three weeks because the road through Killyleagh has been closed for resurfacing. Taking the alternative route to work through Crossgar means that my attention has been grabbed by signs and wonders that I would not otherwise normally have seen. Well, signs anyway.

For example, halfway to Crossgar there is a large colourful sign that has been erected on the roadside by a well-known estate agent which announces that there are “*Five Prestigious Building sites for Sale*”. Now, this begs questions to me such as: what does a prestigious building site look like? And, who is likely to be attracted by such a sign? Most building sites of my acquaintance have been muddy holes in the ground or, at best, virgin fields. Hardly prestigious, but I think that we can guess what the estate agent was aiming at.

Further along the road there is a second large colourful sign erected by a rival agent advertising a large detached house for sale with extensive grounds and promising any potential purchaser that it will afford “*Country living at its best.*” Once again, I can’t help trying to imagine what this “country living at its best” might look like. Perhaps it is a hint that once you buy the house your life will be a heady swirl of dazzling 18th Century balls in large country houses where beautiful, elegant ladies like Elizabeth Bennett and rich, dashing young men like Mr D’Arcy will dance the night away? Or perhaps, to be more contemporary, you will be able to swap your old worn-out Nissan for a new Range Rover, buy a horsebox and indulge your secret passion for dressage?

It seems to me that these advertisements provoke and ask questions of somebody who may be trying to live a Christian life. Should a Christian want to buy a “Prestigious” building site? And if so, why?

The Westminster Shorter Catechism can be a help here. It asks the question, “What is the chief end of man?” and it then answers itself in a scripturally–accurate fashion by saying that “Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.” So that’s straightforward enough: we really ought to be more concerned about God’s prestige than our own.

Of course, there’s nothing wrong with wishing to have nice things, but I think that we know that the description of the sites as “prestigious” is used in order to appeal to our pride. It was our weakness around pride that caused the fall in the Garden of Eden and the Bible warns us about where it can lead:

“Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall” (Proverbs 16:18). And in Matthew’s gospel our Lord says, *“And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted.”* (Matthew 23:12)

Two men in Genesis had to wrestle about the issue of what exactly “country living at its best” was. The land could not support the flocks of Abraham and Lot and their herdsmen began to squabble with each other over water and pasture. In order to avoid further unpleasantness Abraham magnanimously suggested that they part company and that Lot have first choice over where they might go. We learn that: *“And Lot lifted up his eyes, and beheld all the plain of Jordan, that it was well watered everywhere, before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, even as the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt...”* (Genesis 13:10)

The reference to the “garden of the Lord” suggests to me that the vista of the fertile Jordan plain had an almost Eden-like quality and Lot obviously was tempted to go there to live. But things were perhaps not quite as they seemed. As the narrative progresses we find that: *“Then Lot chose him all the plain of Jordan; and Lot journeyed East: and they separated themselves the one from the other. Abraham dwelled in the land of Canaan and Lot dwelled in the cities of the plain and pitched his tent towards Sodom.”* (Genesis 13:11-12)

Abraham went in a different direction into a different part of the country and took with him a rather different mindset: *“Then Abraham removed his tent, and came and dwelt in the plain of Mamre, which is in Hebron, and built there an altar unto the Lord.”* (Genesis 13:18)

The word “Hebron” means fellowship and “Mamre” means richness.

Verse 12 gives us a hint of the trouble that Lot is storing up for himself when he *“pitched his tent towards Sodom.”* He is just asking for trouble by electing to live cheek-by-jowl with such sinfulness. The foolishness of this decision is later confirmed in 2 Peter 2:8 where, referring to Lot, Peter tells us: *“For that righteous man dwelling among them, in seeing and hearing, vexed his righteous soul from day to day with their unlawful deeds.”*

Now I’m not suggesting that if you pitch your tent (or buy a house) close to the distractions of Crossgar that you are putting yourself in spiritual danger! But the Genesis story suggests to me that if you wish to enjoy “country living at its best” (and as we know that can only be done by living the Christian life), a degree of “separateness”, as demonstrated by Abraham, is called for.

As Lot pitches his tent towards Sodom, living now without the godly influence of Abraham, we can begin to imagine how he will more easily gravitate away from the things of God and give himself over to the things of the city and of the world. He perhaps thinks that he can have his cake and eat it, in that he will be able to maintain his relationship with God and at the same time amuse himself with all the entertainments that Sodom has to offer. But it would appear that the Christian life is not quite like that. You cannot have both and if you try to, you may well live without peace; with the vexed soul that Peter refers to above.

Elijah had something to say about this dual mindset when he was addressing the Jewish people: *“And Elijah came unto all the people, and said, How long halt ye between two opinions? If the Lord be God follow him: but if Baal, then follow him. And the people answered him not a word.”* (1 Kings 18:21)

Let me digress for a moment. There is an old belief among men who have played either professional or amateur football about players getting foot, ankle, shin, and knee injuries through tough tackling. It seems somewhat paradoxical and goes something like this: players who tackle in a full-blooded way will get a smaller number of injuries and less serious injuries than those who are only half-committed in their tackling. Living the Christian life must be similar, in that it is easier to live when you are committed to the cause than it is to live in a semi-detached way. Lot was not enjoying country living at its best because of his lack of commitment, and the Jews referred to by Elijah, who stood halted between God and Baal, were similarly hamstrung by their indecision.

So to summarise, the moral of the story is:

- (a) beware of those things that engage your prideful nature (we all have it);
- (b) live separately and fully aware of the snares of this world; and
- (c) don't always believe what others might tell you!