

ELEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST – 4th August 2013 7.00am Eucharist 8.00am

Eucharist 9.30am Solemn Eucharist Readings: Hosea 11:1-11; Psalm 107:1-9, 43; Colossians 3:1-11; Luke 12:13-21

“Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions” (Luke 12:15). Many have the mistaken notion that God is interested in the same things we are. A few Sundays ago we heard Martha say to Jesus “Lord don’t you care?” In today’s Gospel one of two brothers asks Jesus to arbitrate an inheritance dispute. Jesus replies, “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” (v.14).

There’s no evidence that this man was just being greedy or that he didn’t have a legitimate concern. Maybe his brother was trying to take advantage of him and he’s desperate: “Tell my brother to divide the inheritance....” The only response he receives is as good as “It’s not my problem; I don’t want to get involved.”

Jesus then turns his attention to the crowd. “And he said to them, “Take care! (The Greek word ὁρᾶτε comes from the root to look, to see, to behold. So literally “Beware.” “Watch out!”) Be on your guard against all kinds of greed...” This is dangerous territory so be alert.

To illustrate this Jesus tells a parable of a rich man who had so much wealth he could afford not just to extend his barns but to tear them down and build newer and bigger ones. He had it made. He was secure and settled and self-satisfied. Possessions have a way of doing that to us. Soul, take it easy, you’ve got it made. Jesus says, “Watch out!”

Notice the rich man does most of the talking. And who does he talk to? Himself. He didn’t need to consult anyone, not even God. But then God speaks. And God doesn’t say, as many in our culture today would say, “Congratulations. You’ve shown how wise and savvy and shrewd you are by securing your future. Now you can take it easy and relax and enjoy a long and prosperous future.”

No, he says, “You fool. Tonight you’ll be dead. Who’ll get all this stuff you’ve accumulated then?” It would be a mistake to read this as God punishing the man. That would portray God as some sort of celestial tyrant who hates seeing people enjoying themselves and causes them harm to teach them a lesson or worse, to exact some sort of vengeance. God is not punishing him by taking his life away. His time had come that’s all; as it does for all of us.

This story says the things we cling to as some sort of insurance against the future, don’t work. The OT book of Ecclesiastes laments the reality of working hard all your life, increasing your net worth and at the end somebody else gets it all. This is part of the spiritual wisdom of all religious and philosophical traditions. It’s not specifically Christological. There’s no saviour, no redeemer in the story. Jesus is a teacher of wisdom here. Any wise teacher like Solomon could have said it.

For example, the Stoic philosopher Seneca said, “If what you have seems insufficient to you, then, though you possess the world, you will yet be miserable.” Francis Bacon said, “Happy is the man who has . . . put under his feet . . . the noisy strife of the hell of greed.”

“Philosophy directs us first to seek the goods of the mind and the rest will be either supplied, or not much wanted.”

And Rudyard Kipling, in an address to the graduating medical students of McGill University, said, “You’ll go out from here, and very likely you’ll make a lot of money. One day you’ll meet someone for whom that means very little. Then you will know how poor you are.”

All of them are saying the same thing as Jesus. Our lives do not consist in the abundance of our possessions. Therefore, says Jesus, don’t worry about it. Life is more than food and drink and clothes. So what does Jesus suggest? Get back to nature. “Consider the ravens . . . consider the lilies . . .” Consider, ponder, think about it, meditate, take time out, pause, look, examine God’s creation. Walk through the bush, walk along the beach, examine a flower, listen to the birds, marvel at the beauty and sacredness of God’s creation. If God has gone to such trouble to care for his creation, won’t he look after you?

It’s not wrong to enjoy the good things of life and to have nice things. Jesus says, “. . . your heavenly knows that you need all these things” (Matthew 7:32). Jesus drove home the point of the story by saying not, “So it is with those who store up treasure for themselves” . . . full stop. He said, “So it is for those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God” (v. 21).

G.K. Chesterton said that when we “cease to worship God, we do not worship nothing, we worship anything.” When God has been done away with we find replacements – idols. We come to rely on external means to give us meaning or to alleviate pain and stress and to provide ultimate security. It leads only to more stress and insecurity. But when we recognise how God loves us and holds us in his hand and cares for us more than we’ll ever know, we are free to enjoy the gifts God provides for us.

For some years now we’ve been aware of the phenomena of sea change and tree change and grey nomads: increasing numbers of people in Western society opting for a simpler lifestyle. In the churches there’s the new monastic movement. Places of pilgrimage like Walsingham and Santiago de Compostela are popular. The new Pope has won approval for a simple style.

The word “simplicity” contains the Latin word ‘plex’ which means “fold.” So ‘duplicity’ means a ‘double-sided situation.’ ‘Complicity’ means ‘to fold together’ and ‘complex’ means ‘many folds.’ ‘Simplicity’ means to have no folds, to be smooth and simple.

It’s easy and tempting to make Jesus anything we feel we need at the moment. Got family problems? Jesus is my counsellor. Got inheritance problems? Jesus is your lawyer. Got financial problems? Jesus can be your business partner. We don’t come here on Sundays to get Jesus on side or to enlist him to support our cause or to bless our agenda. “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” Jesus answers us the same as he answered the man who tried to enlist his help. “That’s not my concern.”

William H. Willimon says, “In the New Testament I don’t see a picture of Jesus as that technique that helps you get what you want. Rather, I see Jesus as a constant challenge to what I thought I wanted and needed. Jesus called disciples – people who were willing to discipline their wants and desires

to walk his narrow way – not simply admirers who took a quick look at Jesus and his message and said, ‘Hey, I think I can use that!’”

American Professor of Theological Studies, American Religion and History of Spirituality at Saint Louis University Belden C. Lane says, “I really don’t want a God who is solicitous of my every need, fawning for my attention, eager for nothing in the world so much as the fulfilment of my self-potential. One of the scourges of our age is that all of our deities are house-broken and eminently companionable. Far from demanding anything, they ask only how they can more meaningfully enhance the lives of those they serve.”

Let us beware, watch out for the temptation to approach our spiritual lives with the question “What is important to me, to us, and how can Jesus help with that?” Instead, let’s ask, “What’s important to Jesus? What does the Lord require for me to be a faithful disciple? What is God’s agenda for me?”

What Jesus seems to be asking us to do in this story from Luke’s Gospel is not to ask him to bless our plans, projects and agenda, but rather to reframe our questions and then to listen. The one who told this parable is the answer to the parable. Our lives consist not in the abundance of our treasures but in the abundance of our relationship with God and our listening to his will.

The Eucharist reminds us of and is the means of God’s abundant provision. Here at the table we experience the ongoing nourishment of God’s grace in the spiritual food of the precious body and blood of Christ. Here we experience a foretaste of life in God’s eternal kingdom and are strengthened to go forth and proclaim and embody that kingdom.

Fr Mark Watson