

Sermon September 27 2020 10.30am; Luke 12 16-30; Harvest

“You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” (Luke 12 20)

Our grandsons came round yesterday to help us pick the fruit in the garden. They are little eating machines and after they'd finished there wasn't much left to store in barns! In the gospel reading a bystander had asked Jesus to tell his brother to share the inheritance with him, and this story is Jesus' response. It's asking us to consider what our priorities should be as we face the knowledge of our mortality. Keri in her work has for many years taught Advance Care Planning. As we face the finite end of life, this encourages us to think about the end or purpose of our living: What is important and what isn't? What should we be worrying about and what not? What should our priorities be? Those are questions we are all facing because of COVID 19 and not just in the last year of life. Every time we experience a loss, a small death, it poses questions about our priorities – what to let go of, what to worry about and what not to.

Hence Jesus' famous words in the second half of the gospel reading: “Do not worry about what to eat or what to wear, for life is more than food and the body more than clothing. Consider the lilies.....” as David Attenborough might have said today. Jesus is not advising us to be irresponsible in dealing with our everyday personal and family responsibilities. Rather he is challenging us to seek and find a deeper security – the life of the soul – from which we can deal with those responsibilities wisely and joyfully. And part of what coming to church is about is a search for that deep truth, that deep security in order that we may know what's important and what not, what to worry about and what not.

In our discussions about this reading at our Tuesday morning staff meeting our thoughts quickly turned to the ecclesiastical barns from which we have been excluded during Lockdown. Worship inside a church building points us to and connects us with something beyond ourselves – a bigger reality from which we all come and to which we shall one day return. If we can't come inside a church building in our pursuit of joy, meaning and security of living, we have to go elsewhere, deep within ourselves, to find those things. That has been the challenge and opportunity of recent months.

Each of us lives within three levels of meaning (and acknowledgements to Richard Rohr and the Center of Action and Contemplation for this):

1. My Story; my private life; how I see things; my possessions. Jesus is always teaching us to let go of this level in order to find our deeper and truer life and security.

2. Our Story. Our group, family, community, tribe, church. We all need to belong so this level is important. Before Lockdown we wondered how this sense of community would be maintained, and the answer seems to be pretty well thanks to Zoom, telephone ministry and good neighbourliness. This is about God's immanence and the Body of Christ

3. The Story. The largest dome of meaning – the realm of universal meaning. Jesus is always (and in today's gospel) drawing us towards this level of sacred identity, to find our true identity and our true security in the transcendent love of God. And because we haven't been able to go inside a church building until recently, there is a real opportunity and challenge to go deep within ourselves to find that.

Richard Young pointed me to a good article in The Sunday Times recently by Matthew Syed, writing about uncertainty. In facing this pandemic there are lots of questions to which we just don't know

the answer – when will it end, when will a vaccine be available, will I be affected and if so, how? Questions to which even Medics, scientists and Government Ministers don't know the answers, because we haven't had to deal with this before. And it's important to be honest about that and not to pretend to a certainty that isn't there or get cross when Governments or others in authority get things wrong, as they inevitably will.

The challenge again is to find a deeper security from which to live with this inevitable uncertainty with joy and freedom and without fear. Remember that the opposite of faith is not doubt but certainty.

Ultimately we are dealing with the mystery of God – and the answer to that mystery is not to retreat into false certainties, fundamentalist faith, simplistic reading of scripture, or unhealthily clinging to particular liturgies or even church buildings. These are human things! And will all pass. John of the Cross many centuries ago taught that there is and always will be a cloud of unknowing between us and God. And we are to seek to penetrate that not with the head, with clever theories or mental constructs, but with the longings of the heart. So in these strange days make space in your life to listen to the promptings of your heart and its longings. Make time to go deep within yourself to find the silent spaciousness of God. And from that place will come the security and the strength to live with joy and freedom and to find a love that will sustain you whatever the trials that may lie ahead – and indeed, to come back to where we started, to ensure that the priorities of your living are wise ones.

Mark Thomas