

Readings for the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

31st July 2022

First Reading: Hosea 11:1-11

Hear the word of the LORD, O people. When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols.

Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them. They shall return to the land of Egypt, and Assyria shall be their king, because they have refused to return to me. The sword rages in their cities, it consumes their oracle-priests, and devours because of their schemes. My people are bent on turning away from me. To the Most High they call, but he does not raise them up at all.

How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.

They shall go after the LORD, who roars like a lion; when he roars, his children shall come trembling from the west. They shall come trembling like birds from Egypt, and like doves from the land of Assyria; and I will return them to their homes, says the LORD.

Second Reading: Colossians 3:1-11

If you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life. But now you must get rid of all such things – anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!

Gospel: St Luke 12:13-21

Someone in the crowd said to Jesus, 'Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.' But he said to him, 'Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?' And he said to the crowd, 'Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.'

Then he told them a parable: 'The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, "What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?" Then he said, "I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'" But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.'

A Reflection for the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

I find that there are some aspects of Jesus' teaching that are more uncomfortable than others. In so-called 'Western' developed countries, his teaching about money and wealth often falls into that category as we consider the needs of the world around us. Today's Gospel reading, the parable of the Rich Fool, is one such.

In our society, it is considered responsible to save for the future if we are able, to try to make sure we have enough to provide for the future needs of our family. Wasn't it just sensible for this farmer to put aside his excess for times to come? And surely it is OK to enjoy the fruits of our labours?

Materialism is seductive. Advertising makes us aware of the things we don't have, however much we already possess. It tries to convince us that our lives would be complete if we only had this particular household gadget, or that specific brand of clothing. But, as many of us have personal experience of, no amount of money or possessions protects us from illness or accidents, and money can often be a cause of division in families.

The danger of wealth is one of Luke's major themes, along with Jesus' concern for the poor. Wealth turns us away from dependence on God and can make us insensitive to the needs of the poor. In many places in the Old Testament, wealth was seen as a sign of God's blessing, yet the prophets warned of its dangers. Fighting over inheritance is sadly all too common in all societies and cultures. Today's Gospel starts with a man coming to Jesus asking him to rule in a dispute over inheritance. In 1st century Jewish culture, it was common for people to ask rabbis to rule in matters of inheritance. According to the Law, the eldest son inherited a double portion of his father's estate and was responsible for either keeping it intact or giving shares to his brothers. So, it is likely that the man who came to Jesus was a younger son, similar to the parable of the Prodigal Son. We don't know the circumstances, but if it had been an ordinary claim it is likely that the laws of inheritance would have taken care of it. Whether or not he had a legitimate claim, Jesus refused to get involved, instead using the opportunity to speak of the need to avoid greed and preoccupation with material wealth.

Greed destroys, but generosity blesses us. It is often, not always but often, the poorest in society who are most generous with the little they have. They know what it is to be in need and they give at cost to themselves rather than out of their excess. I spoke a couple of weeks ago about the abundance of hospitality I received in Malawi, from people who know what it is to go without, who even in a good year will face a 'hungry season'. It was and remains a truly humbling experience.

So Jesus speaks of guarding against all kinds of greed and tells this parable of the Rich Fool. In this story, the man is not a fool because he is wealthy, or because he has saved for the future, but because he believes his security lies in his wealth. He assumes he has control over his future – he speaks repeatedly of himself and what he will do with the

bumper crop. There is no hint of gratitude to God, or indeed to his workforce, for all that the land has produced. There is no suggestion of sharing or of selling some of the crop which, in a year of glut, would bring down prices for the poor. There is no consideration of what God requires of him or that he is dependent on God. Last week, in the Lord's Prayers, the phrase 'Give us this day our daily bread' reminded us that we are ultimately dependent on God for everything. He does not recognise that his very life is in God's hands and that, to use a colloquial phrase, 'he can't take it with him'.

Of course, this whole area of money is fraught with difficulty. It is neither true nor loving to suggest to someone who is struggling financially, particularly in the current cost-of-living crisis, that money is not linked to security when they have no idea how they will pay the next energy bill; when they dread the car breaking down as there is simply nothing in reserve to fix it. People who struggle to get by know only too well the importance of saving for a rainy day whenever possible. But, neither is it true to say that God doesn't want us to enjoy the good things of this world – Jesus ate, drank and enjoyed life with his friends too.

This parable is about our attitudes and priorities. Are our lives aligned simply towards ourselves and our own desires or towards God and our neighbour? We are stewards of money and possessions, the things that God has given us for our time on earth, and responsible for how we use them. We need to listen to our God-given consciences.

In the reading from Hosea, God laments the people's attitude and their desertion of God and his ways. Our Old Testament readings in recent weeks have said much about the consequences of turning away from God under the Old Covenant. But, despite their sin, which is not ignored, we see here God as a loving parent who is compassionate and longs for the people to turn back to him. That love of God was realised in the pathway to reconciliation that came in the person of Jesus Christ.

In Colossians, Paul speaks of how, through Christ, we are enabled to set our minds on the things that are above, not on things that are on earth. Paul says 'you have died': Christ died for our sin and, when we accepted Christ, so our old self died. And we are 'raised with Christ', so we are urged to turn away from the poverty of our many human failings, and live in ways that are rich towards God and his kingdom. Of course, we will get it wrong, but we have a new life in Christ and so we are called to repent those things and live with Christ-like attitudes that reflect God's kingdom: peace and reconciliation, love, justice and generosity.

So, in a materialistic age and society, how can we be faithful to Jesus' teaching on wealth, neither ignoring it and living for ourselves, or over-spiritualising it and ignoring the very real need in the world? This is not a call to feel guilty but it is a challenge to continually re-examine our lifestyle and financial choices. Our circumstances rarely remain static for long, and those of the world around us are constantly changing, so an ongoing response is needed. And we are all called to play our part in caring communities that provide for those in need and challenge the attitudes of global society that so often penalises the poor.