



## Revd Ro's Reflection on The Seventh Sunday after Trinity Proper 13 Year C

**Luke 12.13-21**

**Colossians 3.1-11**

Tomorrow, August 1st is Lammas Day. It was traditional to take the first wheat from the harvest, have it baked into a loaf and present that loaf in church as a thanksgiving. It was the day of 'loaf mass.' I think it's a wonderful tradition and a bit like harvest festival or first fruits. Our gospel reading for today tells a story of a man whose behaviour is the antithesis of this. There was no attempt to put God at the centre of his life or to give thanks for anything.

Our reading has moved on now to the middle of chapter 12. Last week we looked at Jesus teaching his disciples how to pray and then illustrating the relationship of God with his beloved children. It is worth comparing this to our story today. We saw how great gifts bring great responsibilities; relationship is a two way thing. If we look very briefly at the sections which have been omitted our reading is put into context. In chapter eleven after the section on the Lord's Prayer Jesus addresses the Pharisees and lawyers and roundly condemns them. Instead of guiding the people they lay great burdens upon them, they lead them astray. They are concerned about one thing, themselves and the power they have over others. The attack is a very pointed one and it is only a matter of time before these opposition forces unite and turn against Jesus with deadly results. Jesus and the disciples are no longer alone we are told,

<sup>12.1</sup> 'Meanwhile, when the crowd gathered in thousands, so that they trampled on one another, he began to speak first to his disciples, 'Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees, that is, their hypocrisy.' Jesus is talking to the disciples but maybe the crowd were listening and would have understood his feelings about the Pharisees and people of their ilk. Jesus' theme is, trust in God and do not worry. Make your life God centred and not self-centred. That is the key.

<sup>11</sup> 'When they bring you before the synagogues, the rulers, and the authorities, do not worry about how you are to defend yourselves or what you are to say; <sup>12</sup>for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what you ought to say.'

Even in times of extreme danger when their very lives are at risk Jesus' advice is, put God first and trust in him. The Holy Spirit is within you, you are not alone and you will be strengthened by the Spirit. That gift of the Holy Spirit is life changing, for the apostles and for each one of us. Jesus is not just addressing these men two thousand years ago, his words echo down the centuries to every Christian.

'Deny yourselves, take up your cross and follow me.'

The old saying, Christianity is like I crossed out, + has some truth. If a person is self-centred they have got it all wrong. The account we have in our gospel reading spells that out clearly. Firstly we have the man in the crowd. Jesus is bringing the good news of God. He is turning the world's selfish values on their head. He is bringing God's kingdom values. This man has no interest in the wonderful message of life. He is interested in self-first and second.

'Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.'

Jesus is only of interest to him as some kind of referee, a judge, his concern is only to make him give me what I want. He ignores Jesus' message, his demand is trivial and totally against what Jesus is trying to teach. Jesus' answer is round and puts him well and truly in his place.

<sup>14</sup> 'But he said to him, 'Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?'

As ever Jesus uses this example of selfish behaviour to illustrate a central point. The man in the parable is the centre of his own universe. Jesus poses the challenge to the crowd and indeed to us all. Are you like this? Are you self-absorbed, self-centred? Are you out to get what you can, including power over others? Or are you God centred?

The passage following this story is the famous one about worry.

<sup>22</sup> 'He said to his disciples, 'Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. <sup>23</sup>For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing.

<sup>24</sup> Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! <sup>25</sup>And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? <sup>26</sup>If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest?'

This does not mean we have to be irresponsible or unconcerned; we have to take responsibility for thinking about where the next meal is coming from or how we will pay a bill. That's natural and Jesus is not advocating being lazy or slipshod. That is not the point. The point is illustrated in our parable. Being absorbed with yourself and what you achieve, what you can gain is wrong.

<sup>15</sup> 'And he said to them, 'Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.'

So many people spend their time trying to achieve more and more status, worrying about how to get promotion which will lead to more money and therefore more possessions. But to do that involves stress and more stress. Life can become a rat race with people vying with each other. Worse still when it involves the desire for power the results can be catastrophic. We have only to look at the news to see that. These are the extremes that selfishness, greed, lust for power and control can lead to.

Well the man in the story is not as bad as that, but it is aimed at all of us. It is the story of a rich man; most of the people in the crowd would have been poor and living at a subsistence level. This rich man is not concerned with helping others only in what he can do with his wealth to achieve a comfortable life for him.

‘The land of a rich man produced abundantly. <sup>17</sup>And he thought to himself, “What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?” <sup>18</sup>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. <sup>19</sup> And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.

Just look at the personal pronouns in this story, then look at what is missing; no mention of God or other people. He has a huge ego and he is the centre of his own universe. He is the antithesis of what Jesus is teaching. Where is, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your mind with all your soul and with all your strength and your neighbour as yourself’, or indeed ‘as I have loved you,’ in his attitude?

The whole of the central teaching of Jesus is missing. There is no room for God, no room for others in his philosophy, he is all in all.

<sup>20</sup> ‘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?” <sup>21</sup>So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.’

Well that’s it at one level, tomorrow you will die so where does all this wealth get you? But there is so much more. This man has not begun to understand the teachings of the scriptures, let alone the revolutionary teachings of Jesus.

Jesus is bringing in God’s Kingdom, a kingdom which will reflect the values of God, not those of selfish humans. The point is not to run after the things of this earth and its corrupt ways but to turn your back on that and live as Christ taught. Never mind about self-absorption, put God at the centre of your lives and think of others, care for others. Jesus condemns wrong wherever he meets it, teaching of the new way, God’s way.

People must learn that in God’s eyes there is no superiority, no status. All are equally loved, all are equally important. All who turn to Jesus as Lord and adopt his way of life will inherit his promises and be co-heirs with Jesus. Jesus is king of the cosmos but he knelt down in love to wash the feet of twelve poor men, including Judas. Love and service is at the centre, love of God and love for others. The man in the story is so self-satisfied he couldn’t care less about anyone else; he thinks he has it all. Actually he has nothing at all of importance. His life is an empty one.

To live a fulfilled life is to follow the life of Jesus and the good news he brings, to live out the kingdom values and they will be brought to complete fruition in God’s newly restored order with Jesus as king. It is up to every one of us to work for that day and this story illustrates the pitfalls to avoid in our lives.

We have seen the catastrophic results for the individual who focuses on themselves and self-gratification and concern. This man has no interest in God and eternal life. His spiritual life seems non-existent of no concern to him so long as he can, ‘eat, drink and be merry’ in the here and now. The reading from Colossians chapter 3 dovetails with this passage superbly.

Paul has told these new Christians in Colossae of the truth of the supremacy of Christ; that they must not be led astray by those who would water down Christianity, bind them into the old Jewish law or any other rituals or heresy. There is only one true teaching and Paul and his followers have taught them of the wonderful truths of Christ and of the kingdom to come.

Paul looks now at behaviour,

‘So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. <sup>2</sup>Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, <sup>3</sup>for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.’

There is nothing wrong with the created order, it is of God but God’s plan will be to get rid of all that is wrong in his renewed order with Jesus at its head. The kingdom values then are what they should be, focusing not on the old ways that they lived as pagans. The man in the story from Luke was obsessed with himself and his own wealth and desires, Paul paints a picture of behaviour in the old pagan days. If Christ has died and been raised, you who have turned to him have died to sin and have been raised to new life in him. For that reason there must be no backsliding, you as new Christians must behave as such.

<sup>4</sup> ‘When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.’

Christ, the king of the cosmos, will return in glory to rule God’s renewed order and you will take your places with him, that is what you must set your minds on and live your lives accordingly.

It would be catastrophic for individuals and for the community if the old ways were to resurface, they are destructive. Paul does not hold back when he describes the behaviour they used to indulge in.

<sup>5</sup> ‘Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). <sup>6</sup>On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. <sup>7</sup> These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life.’

Sexual immorality is what he focuses on here. Sexual love is a gift of God, it is an expression of true love, or it should be. When it is not, it becomes more of an abuse and people are hurt by another’s selfish desires. All this must be turned away from. Paul mentions greed, and once again we think of the parable that outlines a man’s greed and his desire to accumulate more and more for himself.

This selfish behaviour is no longer part of who you are, ‘turn from sin and turn to Christ.’

Now Paul turns his attention to speech, to what people say. The tongue is a two edged sword it can do great good and great harm. It is only an instrument, it is the person’s character and motivation that control it. Paul describes here the evil people can do by what is said. Anger and malice will have their outlet in what a person says. They will destroy people and communities.

<sup>8</sup> ‘But now you must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. <sup>9</sup>Do not lie to one another.’

A community cannot survive with these things at the heart. Of course anger is fair enough in the face of wrong and injustice. The emotion properly governed is not wrong. Jesus himself was angry when he saw abuse. Paul is not talking about this; it is unbridled anger, jealousy, malicious gossip, bullying, and cruelty. All this is unchristian. It is not acceptable in a Christian community and it will destroy the church. The truth is all in all, lies are not acceptable. We may feel complacent and think, well we don’t do those things but actually when you study them maybe we are guilty to some extent.

Paul turns then to baptism and uses it as a metaphor. A person about to be baptised would take off their clothes and go down into the waters, symbolically dying to sin and then rising with Christ to new life as they emerged from the waters washed clean by the blood of Christ.

‘you have stripped off the old self with its practices <sup>10</sup>and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator.’

They would put on a new robe, white to symbolise purity. This is such a significant phrase. Humanity was created in God’s image but by our behaviour mankind had fallen away so far from God, had



strayed, going their own way not God's way. In Jesus that perfect image is restored; he is perfect human and divine. He 'lifts our humanity to the heights of his throne.' Jesus' pattern is what should be the aim of every human. Not just that, but in the newly created order God will restore humanity to its perfected image once again. So then it follows that Christians should aim to live out the kingdom values here on earth.

These Colossians were used to being seen as second class by the Jews, they were used to having status; master or slave, male or female and so on. Well those artificial barriers are taken away. There is no second class in Christianity; all are equal in God's eyes. Paul is not saying you are not a slave, you are not a woman or Greek or whatever. He is saying within the creation of God you are all valued and loved. The whole of creation is God's; Jesus is the co-creator there at the beginning of all things. In God's newly restored order all will be free. Everyone will be restored into the perfected image God first created.

Knowing all this the Christian's behaviour must reflect it. 'Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven'; indeed it will and it is by our behaviour we will make or mar the church here on earth. Paul has spelled out quite clearly what is necessary. Anyone who does not take heed is deliberately deluding themselves. There are no excuses. Jesus put it more succinctly, 'Love one another as I have loved you.' I find myself writing that over and over but it is the key to everything. 'Do that and you will live.'

Paul goes on to describe how that looks in practise, after all that negative and destructive behaviour look at the true pattern.

<sup>12</sup> 'As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. <sup>13</sup> Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. <sup>14</sup> Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. <sup>15</sup> And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.'

There is no more to say than this, Paul has delineated the pattern of behaviour for the church and it holds as true for each individual today as it did then.

*'Peace perfect peace is the gift of Christ our Lord.'* Kevin Mayhew.

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