

Sunday 5 August: 9th Sunday after Trinity

Being accountable

Readings: Colossians 3:1-11; Luke 12:13-21

“You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And all the things you have prepared, whose will they be?”

When I was a child, my group of friends seemed to be divided between those for whom pocket money day meant an instant trip to Woolworths to “spend, spend, spend” and those who were rather more circumspect and liked to shake their piggy banks and enjoy the feel and sound of them filling up. In theory at least, it’s part of growing up to learn that the present is not the only thing that matters, and sometimes we have to take the future into account when we make decisions about what we have or possess. I suppose I grew up in an era where in the South Wales valleys, as in much else of the industrialised western world, it was just possible for many ordinary working people to take seriously the possibility of saving for the future rather than the sort of grinding poverty in which every penny is used for the bare essentials. So for the adults in my family, pension schemes and mortgages opened the possibility of a moderately comfortable retirement at the end of a working life.

But planning financially for the future, while sensible, has always been rather precarious, and in recent years, the collapse of pension schemes and plummeting value of endowment policies have left even the most devout piggy shakers feeling quite rightly, cheated, deceived and deprived of all they had so carefully planned and saved for. Perhaps it’s partly in response that we’ve seen the growth of the “buy now, pay later” culture with all the vicious irony that lies hidden in that statement.

And of course, it’s not planning for the future financially that concerns us. Flooding, both here in the UK and in vast swathes of South Asia has increased the anxiety on the longer term effects on global warming. How do we plan for a future of rising sea levels, of shifting weather patterns and balance that against the need to feed and house people? How do we manage the resources of our health service when a generation of obese children points to a whole host of future health problems? And on any number of other issues, we, individually and communally are constantly holding in tension, the need to live fully in the present while trying to plan as sensibly as possible for an unpredictable future.

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As our Gospel reading today shows that is not a problem unique to modern times. Read the letters of the New Testament and you’ll find the first Christian communities struggling to hold together the tension between the expectation of and imminent return of Christ in judgement, and a growing realisation that living the faith meant having to find some sustainable pattern of worship and community life both for the present and into the future. We can see something of that in the letter to the Colossians that we heard earlier. That’s believed to be one of the later of the New Testament letters to be written, and if you read the whole of Chapter 3 from which today’s passage comes, you’ll find those sort of tensions captured perfectly. The chapter opens with that exhortation to:

“Seek the things that are above” and “Set your minds on things above, not on things that are on the earth..”

It seems clear from the focus for the community is a future beyond the earthly present -a future where relations will look very different to those of the present:

“In the renewal, there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!”

But the chapter ends with some equally strong directions on how wives and husbands, parents and children, even masters and slaves should relate to one another. It's a passage as earthly as the previous verses are visionary, and for me illustrates perfectly that what I struggle with in trying to live my faith today is not an uncommon or a new tension. For as Christians, as our readings illustrate we also face a further tension and a further question of accountability. It's not just ourselves, or our future, or our families' futures, or future generations in broader terms to whom we are responsible or accountable in making decisions about how we live or how use our gifts and resources. We are answerable to the God who created and redeemed us. Accountability is not an invention of 21st century management-speak. Accountability is a theme that occurs time and time again in the Gospels.

“From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded” says Jesus in the next chapter of Luke's Gospel.

“You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And all 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 few days ago, on 31st July, the church marked the feast day of St. Ignatius of Loyola, the 16th century soldier turned religious, who founded the Society of Jesus, usually known as the Jesuits. As some of you know, I've just come back from a long retreat and in fact, I've spent the last month in the company of Ignatius, following what he calls his “Spiritual Exercises”. He wrote these guidelines on prayer, meditation and discernment out of his own experience of life and prayer, and five hundred years on they are as fresh and challenging and imbued with the Holy Spirit as when he wrote them.

After five weeks with Ignatius, it's inevitable that in thinking about this sermon, I would ponder what he had to say on this matter. Although he doesn't use the term accountability, much of what Ignatius writes and prays about and encourages others to reflect on is that very subject. Being “rich towards God” and “seeking the things that are above” are high on the list of Ignatian spirituality – asking us to choose where our true allegiance lies occurs time and time again in his Exercises.

But what I love about Ignatius, and all those whose writings and spirit cross barriers of time and culture are that they are deeply rooted in the reality of living the faith. For Ignatius, “Being rich towards God” or “seeking the things that are above” doesn't mean retreating into a holy huddle, or walking through life in a permanent state of serene detachment. Rather, it's about looking seriously at our lives, in all their richness, both material and otherwise, and asking ourselves daily what it means to follow in the way of an incarnate, crucified and risen Saviour. Ignatius would echo the words of the letter to the Colossians, which says that to be clothed with Christ means a stripping of our old selves. Ignatius and others like him would recognise that process of ongoing renewal – an ongoing process of death and resurrection.

Ignatius would recognise that renewal as a very serious process of accountability that challenges with the questions – “what really, really matters to us?”. If our life were to be demanded of us this day, what would we count as our riches? What are the things that give real value to our existence? What do we value above all else?

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At the end of Spiritual Exercises, Ignatius invites the person taking the exercises to spend take time to contemplate the love of God, expressed in all the gifts God has given us, and in the giving of God himself in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And in the light of all those gifts, and the deep, deep sense of gratitude that wells up within, Ignatius asks a real question of accountability – how do we respond to all that we have been given by God in Jesus Christ and in the gift of the Spirit. Ignatius expressed his response in these words:

*Take, Lord and receive
all my liberty, my memory,
my intellect, my will
- all that I have and possess.*

*You gave it to me;
to you Lord I return it.*

*All is yours,
dispose of it according to your will.*

*Give me your love and grace
for this is enough for me.*