

Sunday 1 August: Ninth Sunday after Trinity

God and Work

Readings: Colossians 3.1-11; Luke 12.13-21

The parable in today's Gospel reading seems, in a way, almost too easy to preach to. What do we have here? A rich man who focusses on accumulating material things. He then worships those things rather than God. And, as a result he's punished by God. The moral of the story: worship God, not things. To give it a slightly more contemporary feel, perhaps the preacher can update the parable by making the landowner into a selfish banker. So the increase in crops becomes the size of his ever-growing bonus, the new barn becomes the constant expansion of his mega-house in Chelsea, and his delusion of self-earned self-sufficiency remains the same. So there we are. Everyone leaves church feeling virtuous three times over. We've spent an hour worshipping God. We can be confident that the bankers will get what's coming to them. And, of course, we have the comfort of knowing that we're not like them.

So, is that it? Well, actually, I'm not sure that's quite enough. I was reminded the other day of a quote by an American writer – philosopher – called Henry David Thoreau. Living in isolation on Walden Pond in Massachusetts in the 1840s, he looked out to a world of work and saw many who were trapped, enslaved by their jobs. As a result of this, he wrote, “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.” That's a sentiment that many in the workplace today would also sign up to. But what does Thoreau have to do with this parable from Luke? Well, I think, that that desperation can in fact flow from a certain way of reading parables like this, and, indeed, from a certain way of reading the teachings of Jesus more generally.

This parable, and similar ones about storing up treasures on earth, about the splendour of the lilies of the valley, are interpreted – quite often – as statements about the inferiority of material things, compared to spiritual things. This has ancient roots. Many early Christians – as well as many since – saw the spiritual as more perfect than the material; saw the current world as simply a shadowy, imperfect reflection of the ideal world. But this emphasis on the superiority of the spiritual ignores one of the crucial facts about our God, because it ignores the incarnation. It ignores the fact that our God came amongst us and lived on earth. God is not just spirit, but also became flesh. Jesus came to redeem a world that was, to be sure damaged – fallen, sinful if you will – but a physical world which the Father had lovingly created, and which he wished to make perfect once more. And in this physical world, generally, things don't just happen on their own. We have to help them happen. So we must work to grow food, to make clothes, to build houses. To fulfill God's will for the world, as he intended it, we must work.

A week ago I had the privilege of a long talk with Geoffrey Brown, Nick's predecessor as Vicar. Many of you will know him better than I, but it was Geoffrey who set St Martin's on the road to recovery by starting the various businesses that now support us, and make possible so much of what we do. And Geoffrey said that it was during the course of that business-building process that he came to realize that our dualistic view of work versus worship, of material things versus spiritual things was, quite simply, completely wrong. Again as many of you will know, he illustrates this with the story of St Martin's cloak. It is wonderful, he says, that St Martin split his cloak with the beggar, but think also of all people in the chain who led to that. The shepherd, the shearer, the carder, the weaver, the dyer, the cloak-maker, the shipper and the salesman. Only

because of all these people – not to mention the people who made the sword – could St Martin do the will of God. Because only with all these people did St Martin have a cloak to cut in half. So work and material things are not secondary or inferior to worship, they are a vital part of it. They are a vital part of God's creation, and of right living in it, as intended by God.

Or to take another example equally close at hand: the Connection at St Martin's. It wouldn't exist without a lot of money given either through taxes, or through direct contributions from people who have earned that money in their ordinary, normal secular work. And yet it is that money which enables the Connection to fulfil our gospel obligations, and thereby to worship God.

But this last example may be helpful in understanding where Thoreau's quiet desperation creeps in. Many don't view work itself as bad. But if in our own eyes we justify work by what else it enables us to do – to give to good causes, feed our family, enjoy a holiday, all of them good things, of course – then we are, still, subtly, denigrating work. Work is simply seen as the means to an end, the means to accumulate material things which then enable us to do better, spiritual things. It basically tells us that the eight hours a day, five days a week that we may spend working is not the potentially highest, most godly use of our time.

And that, I think, is wrong. What does the physical incarnation of our God mean? What does the creation – however we may understand it – what does the creation of our physical world mean? And do we really believe that our God is only here, not out there, and only around on Sunday mornings, not the whole time. Well, I hope not. Because I am certain that in this physical, created world that making things, and serving people, whether paid or unpaid, in the home, in the office, wherever, whatever, that these acts are an essential part of how we live our lives as Godly people. Not a means to an end, but an end in itself.

So to return to the parable. If it, in any way, makes us doubt the value of work, or despise the making of material things, then I think we have drawn exactly the wrong conclusion from it. What this parable is really about is how we, as humans, take good things – gifts from God – and turn them bad. It's actually good to produce food, and even better to produce still more food which can feed still more people. And it's rather sensible to build barns to protect crops. But what has happened here is that the rich landowner has taken a good thing, and turned it bad. He was blessed – not cursed – but blessed with abundance. Yet it was his attitude to it – a refusal to accept it came from God, a refusal to view work as worship, work as something due to God rather than himself – that turned it into a curse. But if we take the wrong message from this and disassociate, un-link work from God, no longer see the possibilities of worshipping by working, view work as simply a means to an end, then our lives will often be ones of quiet desperation. Work, the majority of our waking life, will always only be second-best. But if we recognize that work – of any type – is a good and natural part of the world that God has made, and that to do work right is to honour, and, yes, to worship him, then our lives will become a single satisfying whole, not two, quietly desperate, broken pieces.

Amen.