

17th Sunday after Trinity

St Mary's, Barnes, 18th September 2016 - Richard Harries

Luke 16, 1-13

A financier was just about to be arrested for fraud. Knowing what awaited him he quickly went through the firm's accounts and noted who owed a lot of money. Then he rang them up and told them that the money they owed had been halved, and the rest would be written off. We would be very surprised indeed if we then heard that that boss of the company had congratulated his employee for this. It was clearly dishonest.

So what are we to make of the parable in today's Gospel which tells essentially the same situation? I would be surprised if you were not puzzled because the passage is confusing and there is no certain agreed meaning. One approach however has been to say that the master who commended the dishonest employee was not the boss of the company but the Lord himself. But this only takes us halfway. Why should Jesus have praised him? The reason given in the Gospel today is that "In dealing with their own kind the children of this world are more astute than the children of light." Or as the more familiar King James Version has it "The children of this world are wiser in their generation than the children of light".

It is important to remember that Jesus was not a straightforward moralist telling us about basic moral standards. There are plenty of those in the Bible, including in today's passage about responsibility in little things. No, Jesus told us arresting stories to get us thinking, and in particular to get us responding to the urgent claims of God's Kingdom that he was putting before them. The presence of God's Kingdom in his ministry presented a crisis to which a response was needed. His point in today's story is that when we are confronted with a crisis in our worldly affairs we pull out all stops. We use all our ingenuity and energy to safeguard our own interests. But do we do the same in relation to the claims of God's kingdom? The short answer is no. We are half hearted about our discipleship, our prayer life, our

support of the church. So, sadly, the children of this world, that is ourselves when we are looking after our worldly affairs, are wiser in their generation than the children of light.

Every Sunday at the 8 am Holy Communion service, except in Lent and Advent, when there is an alternative, the following words are read.

Our Lord Jesus Christ said: Hear O Israel, the lord our God is one Lord; and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all they mind and with all thy strength.

I never fail to be moved and challenged by these words-the foundation statement, the first rule of life, for both Judaism and Christianity. The claim is total, all embracing, unequivocal. No qualifications, no ifs and buts. The problem is that this statement, the first commandment is not only challenging but seriously threatening to so much of what we take for granted. Its particularly threatening to modern culture because the basic assumptions of Western society are now are so very different from all previous ages. A recent book suggests that during the first thousand years of Western history the fundamental ethical principle of society was one of honour. For the next 700 years or so it was some higher purpose, and since the 17th century, it has been self-fulfilment. Of course like all generalisations it is a big simplification, and in particular you might want to argue that the concept of self-fulfilment became so all embracing only in the 20th century. But whenever, this is now the great assumption in so much of our culture. Given that it is not difficult to see why the imperative to love God with all that we are, before anything else is so threatening.

It is however a great mistake to think that the pursuit of some higher purpose, which for us is the love of God, and self-fulfilment, properly understood are in the end hostile to of one another. After all, what is this self which is to be fulfilled? “This is the mystery hidden through the ages and now disclosed”, said Paul, “Christ in you, the hope of glory to come”. What is fulfilment but to find peace of mind. “My

peace I give unto you” said Christ, “not as the world give give I unto you.” What is fulfilment but a sense of inner freedom?—“Grant us so to know you that we may fully serve you, and so to love you that we may fully serve you, whose service is perfect freedom”, prayed St Augustine. Peace, joy, freedom, all are found in God.

God is the ground of our being, and beyond all human desiring, the goal of our deepest longing, our true and everlasting good. How can fulfilment be found except in relation to this supreme reality? Except by living at one with the fount from whom moment by moment our being flows and the lure before us in all of our longing?

To live in the light of this reality, in response to that first rule of life, does not mean that ordinary human experiences are devalued. On the contrary, they are enhanced. Life is lived with a new intensity, ordinary things are re-enchanted.

As the Roman Catholic writer G.K.Chesterton once wrote

I do not think there is anyone who takes quite such a fierce pleasure in things being themselves as I do. The startling wetness of water excites and intoxicates me: the fieriness of fire, the steeliness of steel, the unutterable muddiness of mud.

But all this depends as T.S.Eliot put it on a “condition of complete simplicity, costing not less than everything.”

Because we find that simplicity so difficult to commit to, we tend to remain half-hearted, double minded, struggling, divided- open to the criticism that the children of this world are indeed wiser than the children of light. For as todays passage goes on to remind us we cannot have more than one top priority in our lives. “No slave can serve two masters; for either he will hate the first and love the second or he will be devoted to the first and despise the second. You cannot serve God and money-or, we might add, anything else. Therein of course lies the struggle of the Christian life- the struggle, first, in union with Christ, to lift life in all its aspects into the love of God and then to express this in love of the neighbour. That’s the struggle, the

great news is that in so far as we let go into that simplicity, which we do at least in flickers, we find all that would be included in any account of self-fulfilment, deep peace of heart, joy, inner liberation. And Christ has come to join our lives to his, to bring our lives into a Holy Union, a Holy Communion in which the love of God and our true fulfilment belong grow together.