**Sermon preached by Sister Margaret Anne for 10am Sung Eucharist St Mary’s Barnes on 7th Sunday after Trinity 4 August 2019**

It’s very much the holiday season and people spend time going to their favourite places to relax and enjoy themselves. Even when we are not actually away on holiday, it is important to have time for recreation, doing those things which help us to let go of our pressing concerns and work issues and instead partake in pursuits that we find particularly life-giving. I expect many of you, as I do, enjoy spending time outdoors in a green space. We are blessed in South West London with a number of wide-open green spaces, and I particularly enjoy walking in Kew Gardens when I have some free time. I remember being struck by the inscription on a bench there one day as I sat down on it to rest. The inscription on the bench was as usual in memory of someone who had loved the gardens, but what really caught my eye was that somewhat unusually it included a biblical reference as well. It referred to Ecclesiastes Chapter 3. That’s the chapter in the Old Testament that opens with the famous passage about time –

“For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:

a time to be born, and a time to die,”

and the passage concludes,

“a time to love, and a time to hate;

a time for war, and a time for peace”.

It’s a poetic, hymn-like passage and the most well-known section of the whole book. Ecclesiastes takes the form of a monologue spoken by a Teacher. The Teacher or Preacher or Philosopher may well have run an academy in Jerusalem in the late fourth century BC, when Judaism was having to come to terms with Greek philosophy. The Teacher seems to have been uncertain about organised religion and was deeply sensitive to the injustices of the world. Adopting the literary fiction of royalty, he writes of the futility of attempting to discover the meaning of life by human powers of observation. Our first reading today (Ecclesiastes 1.2,12-14;2.18-23) from the opening of the book sets the scene:

“Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity”.

The Teacher seeks for wisdom but comes to pessimistic conclusions concerning human nature and the human condition. By the end of the book, however, some kind of spiritual optimism is attained. Despite the human lot of suffering, pain and injustice, nevertheless the book of Ecclesiastes ends in Chapter 12 with a summary of humanity’s main task:

“Fear God and keep the commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone”.

The final sentence of the book concludes that in the end God’s judgement will indeed be affected. Pessimism gives way to a belief in divine ordering.

It’s easy to be tempted to have a pessimistic outlook on life, given the evident suffering and injustices in the world. We hear of such matters daily in the news, and in our own experience we will all have stories to tell of how things have not turned out well, whether for ourselves or for others known to us. When events turn out badly for us, the pessimism of the opening of Ecclesiastes may well ring true to our experience. Hope, however, together with faith and love, are the three prime theological virtues that we need to cling to when the going gets tough. Without hope in our hearts, we can so easily become bitter and disillusioned, and such states of mind are not good for our well-being. As Christians we are set paradoxically in the world yet not of the world, as Jesus’ great high-priestly prayer in John’s gospel makes clear. Whenever we are tempted to apply merely worldly values to our decision-making, we need to remember our Christian priorities – our bias to the poor, the vulnerable, the helpless – our concern for justice when we encounter power-games of injustice and greed.

The gospels are full of examples of Jesus’ refusal to enter into the dynamics of peoples’ power-games. Our gospel reading today from Luke (Luke 12.13-21) is one such example. It occurs during Luke’s travel narrative when Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. Someone in the crowd demands of Jesus,

“Teacher tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me”.

But Jesus is not going to be bullied into entering into family politics, and instead retorts – as so often, with a challenging question –

“Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?”

Jesus’ method is not about ordering people about and making judgements about their lifestyle. Instead, his way is to proclaim the Kingdom of God and God’s love. He warns the person in the crowd who had appealed to him not to be obsessed with possessions or consumed by greed. Then Jesus goes on to tell a parable to illustrate his point – the parable of the Rich Fool, whose crops were abundant and who pulled down his barns in order to build bigger ones. The rich fool thought he could then “relax, eat, drink” and “be merry”. What he did not know was that the time for his death had come. The moral of the story? We need not to store up earthly goods for ourselves for our own benefit, but rather be “rich towards God”. We need to cultivate spiritual values and make decisions in our daily lives that accord with such values. Money and possessions can so easily distract us from what really matters in life. The spiritual emphasis of the parable is that we need to be generous hearted to others and open to God, rather than be preoccupied with our own selfish desires.

As well as studying the gospels, perhaps one of the best ways of learning more of Christian spiritual values is to study the lives of the saints. Today, 4th August, is the feast day of St Jean-Baptiste Marie Vianney – the Cure d’Ars. He was born in 1786 at Dardilly, near Lyons in France, the son of a peasant farmer. His studies for the priesthood were drawn out over nine years from 1806 – 1815, interrupted for fourteen months when he was in hiding to avoid military service. His progress in theological study was very slow and unpromising, considerably lengthened by his inability to learn Latin. Eventually he was ordained in 1815, more for his devoutness and good will rather than any other qualifications. After his curacy he was sent in 1818 as parish priest to Ars-en-Dombes, a lonely and neglected village. Here he achieved almost world-wide fame. He remained there for forty years until his death in 1859, devoted heart and soul to the parishioners and their needs. But not to them only. First from the neighbouring parishes, then from all France, and finally from other countries too, came men and women, of all sorts and conditions, to seek his counsel. Jean Vianney became known as a preacher and above all as a confessor. Strange tales were heard of this country priest’s spiritual gifts and powers, and the isolated village of Ars became a place of pilgrimage. Tens of thousands of people flocked to Ars. By 1855 the number of his visitors was calculated to be 20,000 a year. During the last few years of his life he is reputed to have spent as many as sixteen hours a day in the confessional, listening to his penitents. He could be severe in the pulpit, but in the confessional, he exercised extraordinary insight and power of conversion. He died on this day in 1859, was canonised in 1925 and in 1929 Pope Pius XI named St Jean Vianney as the patron saint of all parish clergy.

Jean Vianney would well have understood the final teaching of Ecclesiastes – to fear God and keep the commandments – as well as Jesus’ teaching as expounded in the parable of the Rich Fool – to ensure God is our prior claim rather than our wealth or possessions. So, let us endeavour in our own journey to prioritise those spiritual values that really matter, and so grow in the knowledge and love of God and service of our neighbour that is our true calling.