

# *he told them a parable*

a sermon preached on the

*11<sup>th</sup> sunday after pentecost*

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at

*st john's*

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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the lections: Ecclesiastes 1:2,12-14, 2:18-23; Psalm 49:1-12, Colossians 3:1-11, Luke 12:13-21

Once again on this 'way to Jerusalem'<sup>1</sup> we find that the gospel presents a fairly obvious teaching: "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."<sup>2</sup> Once again, it takes no 'scholar' to figure out this blunt teaching, nor the parable Jesus employs to make his point: "You fool! This very night your soul is being demanded of you".<sup>3</sup>

Anyone can understand this very obvious ethical teaching. Indeed, we could even say that the ethical teaching of sacred Scripture is, generally speaking, sufficiently obvious as to require little commentary.

That I am so often incapable of putting the blindingly obvious ethic into practice is no commentary on the ethics per se. Rather, it's a sign that there are other levels of human consciousness which are more powerful. St Paul's rugged self-honesty comes to mind: "I do not understand my own actions... For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do."<sup>4</sup> A much more powerful force is at work!

We can assume that the man who pushes his way through the mindless stampeding crowd<sup>5</sup> – in order to ask Jesus this question about the family inheritance – is well versed in the law. Similarly, we know very well Christ's teaching about possessions, money, investments, and exploitative economic systems. It requires no genius to work this out. The ethical teaching is not difficult to understand.

But like St Paul, we do not do the good we want, but do the evil we do not want. Even though we know that it's folly, nevertheless we continue to place our hope in the futile quest for 'bigger barns', on 'higher returns' on our investments, to place our hope in 'the market'. A much more powerful force is at work within us.

So what I would like to draw out today, then, is what I perceive to be the deeper spiritual issue.

But to do that, it is first necessary to touch on the matter of interpretation: specifically, the different levels of interpretation which were well known to our early forebears, but which are not well understood in our time. I have noted in today's Contact that the early church fathers and mothers realised that sacred Scripture operates at a number of levels. Unlike much of the church now, they did not reduce Scripture to ethical teachings, nor to the historical or literal meaning. There *is* a historical level of meaning, of course. And there is an ethical-moral level of meaning, inevitably. But these levels of Scripture are largely self-explanatory, and superficial.

The truly transformative dimension of Scripture lies deeper than this surface layer. St Paul grasped something of this in that fiercely self-honest confession of the greater power, the hidden, inner, unconscious energy. I think this is what that poke-in-the-eye writer of Ecclesiastes is getting at by describing all human endeavour – which is in itself good and to be celebrated – as mere 'vanity', as "chasing after the wind".<sup>6</sup> And it's clear that Jesus employs parable as a way of getting beneath the surface and the superficial.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 9:51

<sup>2</sup> Luke 12:15

<sup>3</sup> Luke 12:20

<sup>4</sup> Romans 5:15,19

<sup>5</sup> Luke 12:1

<sup>6</sup> Ecclesiastes 1:14,17

Parable is not literal, nor historical, nor even primarily ethical. When we reduce Jesus' parables to mere ethical teaching – as we tend to do with children – we sell them short, skating at the surface, missing their true depth.

For parable is symbol. And it's the symbolic level of Scripture that is truly transformative. I think this is what Jesus is getting at when he makes remarks like, "Let those who have ears listen",<sup>7</sup> and "seeing they do not perceive..."<sup>8</sup> and why "without a parable he told them nothing".<sup>9</sup>

Jesus clearly knew that the symbolic level is the window to the vast unknown human interior – that interior which, as St Paul realised, is always more powerful than the 'thing we want to do'. The man who pushes through the crowd presumably *wants* to do the 'right thing', the ethical thing under the law. But Jesus sees beneath the law – into the man's hidden depths – and there recognises a more potent energy which will always trump law and morality. The barn building and accumulation is a pointer to these depths. For we often find out what's concealed within us by the tell-tales of our attitudes and acted out behaviour.

And the word Jesus employs to get at this is the word I mentioned last week: **juch** *psyche*, the soul. "I will say to my soul, Soul..."<sup>10</sup> The greatest battlefield of human endeavour is not at the level of law, but in our depths, in the theatre of our souls. I suspect this is what lies behind the Islamic teaching that the 'greater Jihad' is an inner struggle. According to this insight, Christians and Muslims are truly sisters and brothers.

Within the theatre of the soul we encounter all the hidden, repressed, denied and unknown aspects of ourself. Every part of us that has been deemed to be unacceptable in some way – which violates or offends or embarrasses our carefully crafted persona, by which we do business and establish our reputations – all this inhabits our hidden interior. It has been said that the iceberg is a useful analogy to grasp the immensity of the psyche: only 5% of our totality is above the surface! The reductive materialism of our time can deny the existence of the psyche-soul all it likes, but that only makes the situation all the more dangerous: since this means that the 95% unacknowledged depths have even greater power over us as a result of our unconsciousness.

By speaking in parable, Jesus identifies where the essence of the matter lies: "But God said to him, 'You foolish man, during this night they demand your *soul*'."<sup>11</sup>

Neglect of the soul – and the greater vocation of the 'inner jihad' – is perhaps the great illness of our time.

But when we do give priority to the soul-psyche, however – being "rich towards God"<sup>12</sup> – then all the neglected and despised parts of ourselves come to consciousness, to light, to be seen, which means they can be thus integrated into a fuller more comprehensive personality. Paradoxically, what we despised becomes the very means of our 'salvation', our wholeness, fulfilment, completeness.

This is a great mystery: all that we had imagined to be unacceptable is in fact united in Christ: in whom there is no longer "Jew or Greek", and so on, only "Christ all in all".<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Mark 4:9,23, Matthew 11:15, 13:9,43, Luke 8:8, 14:35

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 13:13, Luke 8:10

<sup>9</sup> Mark 4:34, Matthew 13:34

<sup>10</sup> Luke 12:19

<sup>11</sup> Luke 12:20 Literal rendering of the Greek.

<sup>12</sup> Luke 12:21

<sup>13</sup> Colossians 3:11