

SUNDAY 8A ALL SAINTS BIRKENEHEAD 2017
THE REVERENED JORDAN GREATBATCH

King Solomon's Mines written in 1885 is a popular novel by the Victorian adventure writer and fabulist Sir H. Rider Haggard. It tells of a search of an unexplored region of Africa by a group of adventurers led by Allan Quatermain for the missing brother of one of the party. It is the first English adventure novel set in Africa, and is considered to be the genesis of the Lost World literary genre. It depicts an adventurer who is searching for the fabled lost mines of King Solomon. This quest, for the location of the mines, still continues to this day. And they in fact have a connection with our Gospel reading. "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.

In order then to understand the comparison Jesus is making between Solomon and the lilies of the field it is worth exploring what is meant by 'Solomon's glory.'

Now we may find it shocking, but according to the Bible King Solomon had 1000 wives, 700 royal wives and 300 concubines. Imagine the servants and guards needed to look after them all. We are even told what they ate in one day - 30 oxen, 100 sheep, plus deer, gazelles, roebucks and fattened fowl. All this food was eaten from golden plates. Of course that's only part of the splendour of Solomon's court. He was knowledgeable and could lecture on plants, animals, birds and fish. He was so pious that he built a temple to honour God. He was a businessman and monopolised the arms trade in his part of the world. He was a warrior and never lost a battle with his 1,400 war chariots and 12000 horses. Maybe it's hard for us to appreciate the wealth and splendour, the expertise and Wisdom of Solomon.

2

Jesus says that Solomon in all his regalia was nothing in comparison to a simple bird or a flower of the field. Jesus wants us to note the extreme contrast in what he is saying. His teaching is not about giving us rules and regulations. Jesus uses examples from everyday life in order to prod our imaginations.

He poses questions about life without giving direct answers. He forces us to take stock by appealing to our senses.

Today is part three of our mini-series on the Sermon on the Mount. The first episode was about the way we treat people like things; about how we set out to harm others by making them less than human. The second episode was about how we are to act when we are treated like things rather than as humans.

Today the Gospel is about how we treat things. What is our attitude to the material things of life?

3

There are many who would have us give up all material things as non-spiritual. They would claim that we are to trust in God to provide and not to worry, as the Gospel may at first sight suggest. But the gospel cannot be taken literally. Jesus is not giving us rules to live by but he is prompting each one of us to make some decisions. The decisions are about what we hold to be really important in life.

We also have to realise that doing away with material things is not Christian. The incarnation, that is, Jesus becoming human, is about God sanctifying the material things of life. Jesus took on human form, something material, and through his physicality expressed what it means to believe in God. For Jesus the material was important.

4

The Church has of course taken this up by what it does in worship. We use material things of life in order to express the spiritual. All the sacraments of the church use material things in order to express things greater than we can understand. Baptism is about water, the Eucharist uses bread and wine, anointing uses oil, marriage is about the giving and receiving of ring, ordination the laying on of hands. So the church is concerned with the material things of life. They are not to be done away with. They express more than we can imagine and they are important.

While I do not think Jesus is asking us to do away with the material things of life, nor do I think Jesus is counselling us to be irresponsible. We are not to neglect family, work, or the needs of others. There are children to educate, there is the mortgage or rent to pay, there is retirement to anticipate and live through. These things take work and effort. Nor is Jesus asking us to be lazy. If we compare ourselves with the birds of the air we need to remember that birds are far from lazy. They are up at 5am!

5

They work incessantly to find food and to build nests. Flowers expend great energy plunging their roots into the soil and sending up their blooms. If we are to be like the birds and the flowers then work is important. We cannot sit back and wait for God to provide everything.

So what are we to do with the things we have? We do not have to give them all away and pretend they are of no value. Nor are we to be like Solomon whose possessions led him to idolatry. He became more concerned with his possessions than with serving God and his people. Our

response to the things of the world, the things we have been given, is to use them in such a way that they will tell us something about the nature of God. As we express our spiritual nature through our material bodies, so the material things of life can express the spiritual. A lot depends on our attitude towards them.

6

The gospel is inviting us to think carefully about our material possessions. Jesus does not give us rules to follow. Rather he lays out some extremes in order to fire our imaginations and make us think. Again it's to do with our attitude to the material. We are not required to do away with the material things of life. Jesus says we are not to find our splendour in them. Our splendour comes from our attitude of seeking God first. The glory of Solomon is not where we find true life. Real life comes from seeking God first, and then the other things we need will be ours as well. By seeking God first we will discover where our true values lie. What are the things we hold in highest regard? Surely life with God and life with others is our highest priority. That is our glory.