

SERMON ORDINARY TIME 18C 2022

ALL SAINTS BIRKENHEAD

I wonder if you have ever worked on a farm? I have done it a few times throughout my life, though mainly when I was younger. Farm work is hard. It consists of long hours and back breaking work. Particularly if you are making hay to be stored away for the winter. This sort of production and storage is common sense. In fact it is often necessary for the life of ones livestock. How come then in today's Gospel, Jesus uses a farmer storing his crops as a teaching image? Is Jesus against storing crops? Does he have no knowledge of how a farm works? I think not. There is something else going on here. There is a more profound message than simply storing up material things.

But this message can often be lost. Throughout the history of Christianity the church has wrestled with the material world. It has either denied it completely, or in fact been obsessed with it. The rejecting of the material can be seen in the life of the early Christian hermits. They saw material objects as an obstacle to a truly godly life, and therefore rejected all forms of material comfort and possession. On the other hand you have such institutions as the Roman Catholic

Church which built up extraordinary material wealth through its church's, palaces and liturgical objects.

So what does this history teach us? And what does today's scriptures say to us about the issue of material wealth? Well, we are guided today not just by one particular scripture, but by three. Firstly we have an Old Testament perspective on material possessions. It doesn't paint a happy picture. The writer of Ecclesiastes proclaims that 'I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind.' The writer is claiming that there is no purpose to our work, our effort to gain material wealth and fortune. They claim that it is of no consequence, and all vanity.

We then shift to a different perspective. We now have the writings of Paul the Apostle, who is appealing to the Colossians to not become obsessed with earthly things, but to 'set their minds on things that are above'. Here we are confronted with a different perspective than that of the writer of Ecclesiastes. For what is all vanity to him, for Paul has a higher purpose.

Paul does this by saying that the Colossians must 'put to death' those things that hinder the spiritual life: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). It is interesting to note that out of

his 5 warnings, 4 of them deal with sexuality and 1 on the idea of material wealth. I say interesting because it seems Paul has a chip on his shoulder in regards to sexuality and its expression, something the church would later also become obsessed with, even to this day. But to use that word *interesting* once again, we note that the last earthly sin is that of greed which he claims is idolatry.

Paul here doesn't seem to be condemning the material, but rather ones relationship with it. And for Paul, Greed is no laughing matter, in fact he feels so strongly about it, he calls it idolatry. Idolatry we are told in the Old Testament is the greatest of offences. Idolatry seeks to replace God, even eradicate him.

How come then the church has neglected such a serious offence? Why have we obsessed over the first 4 earthly aspects, but neglected the 1? I think there are a variety of reasons. We know that sexuality can have a huge impact on people's lives, and when misused can have awful consequences. But surely, Greed has caused more misery on the earth? Greed has wreaked havoc throughout the ages, and sadly continues to do so. We see it in the now huge gap between the very rich and the very poor. We even see it playing out here in our city with the current housing crisis. Greed can be disguised as good business, greed

can be subversive and subtle. And so it is in our day just as it was in the time of Jesus.

And that is where we come to today's Gospel. Jesus knows the power of greed and its destructive forces. And so he confronts us in the way he often does, through the telling of a parable. His parable of course is in response to a question that someone asks him from the crowd. 'Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.' Quite a reasonable request one might say. But, perhaps all is not as it seems. Perhaps there is something else going on here. We do not know, but Jesus' response seems to indicate there is more to the request. For Jesus echoes the same warning given by St Paul, 'be on your guard against all kinds of *greed*.' He then proceeds to tell us the parable of the rich man who stored up all his crops and once he had done so proclaims that he will now 'relax, eat, drink and be merry.' At first glance we may find Jesus' example of greed perplexing. For as I mentioned at the beginning, we know that making hay and storing ones crops are an essential part of farming. You would be foolish not to do so. What then, is Jesus saying?

I think the answer lies back St Paul's words. In fact, one key word; Idolatry. Now idolatry is a problematic word. The problem with the word idolatry in the

modern context is that it has become used in ways that detract from its original meaning. We now talk of 'American idol' or even 'New Zealand idol', or call people 'our idol'. But what idolatry truly means is the 'extreme admiration, love, or reverence for something or someone.' Put in that context, Paul is saying that the extreme love of material things is an idol because it puts our attention onto something other than the admiration and love of God, and in fact our fellow human beings. And that is all that idolatry is, and that is all that greed is. It is not about having material things, or even enjoying them. But it is about putting such things in the place of God, which leads to selfishness, which ultimately alienates us from those whom we love and the God we worship.

This is what the church has ultimately wrestled with and unfortunately at times misunderstood. It has led to the church denying the material as if it was evil or unclean. But this is a distortion of the Gospel message, which proclaims material things are good, they are there to enjoy and bring enjoyment. But when they become our only focus, this causes us to neglect our society and ultimately our world. For we human beings as a race have allowed greed to destroy our natural surroundings, we have wiped out animal species and we wait to see what its affects may be on

the future of our race. And so Jesus' words are more important than ever in a world often consumed with greed, a world that has enough to share but still many go without.

May we therefore this morning draw strength as we gather together, not as individuals, but as the body of Christ. As we break bread together and share in this holy meal, may we become people of generosity, may our admiration be focused on our source of life and being, may we know God's grace and mercy, so that as St Paul said: Christ may truly be all and in all!

Amen