

SERMON 31 JULY 2016

O Lord, let me try to be right;
Or at the very least, let me try to be true.
In the name of Christ. Amen

At long last summer has arrived, so I am following the example of my ecclesiastical brethren and preaching from the lectern, and not the pulpit. Those of you well acquainted with me will appreciate that I have no desire to prolong my time here, so I won't be long. The more mature among you will remember an American comedian called George Burns, who managed to live for one hundred years and had a very successful career on stage, radio, TV and film; one of his sayings is :

The secret of a good sermon is to have a good beginning and a good ending, then having the two as close together as possible.

That is now my aim and I will therefore endeavor to put this into practice for you. Immediately!

Our readings today appear to be about riches and wealth and the way in which we deal with material possessions.

Psalms 49 reminds us of the folly of relying on our wealth and riches. However wealthy we are, we are all destined to die. 'For we see that the wise die also; with the foolish and ignorant they perish and leave their riches to others'. It doesn't matter how much we have, whatever possessions and properties we call our own, in the end we will all end up in our own small plot of land. 'Their tomb is their home forever, their dwelling through all generations, though they call their lands after their own names'.

We have to realise what is important, which is to listen to God and give ear to Him. When we listen to God, 'my mouth shall speak of wisdom, and my heart shall meditate on understanding'. This applies to all peoples, you of low or high degree, both rich and poor together.

There is not wealth nor riches enough to buy a place in Heaven, neither for ourselves nor for anyone else. 'For no one can indeed ransom another or pay to God the price of deliverance'.

As we hear in the letter to the Colossians, it is only by setting our minds on higher things, seeking the things that are above, where Christ is, and not on things that are on earth, that we can hope to be with God. If we

believe Christ is our Lord and Saviour, then we have died in Christ and will be raised with Christ. Our life is hidden with Christ for the time being, but when Christ is revealed we also will be revealed with Him in glory.

It is because we are now identified with Christ that we must put to death all those things that are earthly, those sins and impurities that separate us from Christ: fornication, passion, evil desire and greed. These things we did when we were living the old life, before we accepted God into our lives.

'Put to death' in this context means not just no longer to indulge in such practices, it means literally to eradicate them totally, to expunge irrevocably for ever any such behaviour. Woe betide you if you profess to be a Christian and still indulge in such practices, you will be considered disobedient, then the wrath of God will fall upon you.

This is worse for us than for someone who has not become a follower of Christ; we as Christians have an obligation to behave and act in a Christian way. The writer of the letter to the Colossians adds a second list of characteristic acts that are practiced by those who live that life, the life before Christ enters in you and starts to transform you: anger, wrath, malice, slander, abusive language. These are not things that a follower of Christ indulges in. At least, I hope that none of us are ... We must get rid of all such things.

When Christ becomes a part of our life, we strip off the old self with these negative practices, and we are clothed with the new self, which the Holy Spirit renews in knowledge in accordance with the image of God. We are then all one in Christ, no one is better or worse, pagan, Jewish, foreign. We are all Christians!

The proof that God does not care about our material worth is clearly demonstrated in our Gospel reading today. In response to a rather petulant demand from someone in the crowd that Jesus should tell his brother to divide the family inheritance, Jesus replies: 'Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?'

Bottom line: God does not care how poor or how rich you are. Jesus goes on to say: 'Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions'.

Note that Jesus makes a point of stating all kinds of greed. God is not talking just of money, but of any kind of possession that is pursued obsessively to the exclusion of anything else.

Remember that in the letter to the Colossians, greed is defined as idolatry.

Here we have the clue that reveals what Christ is trying to tell us in the parable of the rich man tearing down his barns to build bigger and better barns to hold all his ample goods.

The rich man is so proud of all his grain and his goods that he becomes complacent and says to himself; 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry'. But he is so taken with his worldly goods that he has taken no thought for the future.

And when his time comes to die, he cannot take any of it with him. There are no pockets in shrouds.

If you are only concerned with accumulating your earthly possessions and not with deepening your relationship with God, you are fooling yourself and there is no reward.

All that serves to separate us from God is a hindrance to our relationship, and if we concentrate on being wealthy we are not concentrating on being with God. The pursuit of material goods to the exclusion of all else is classed as idolatry, because we are spending our time and attention on material things and not on God.

There is nothing wrong with having possessions, and being wealthy; it is when this becomes more important to us than our faith that we fall into error, become estranged from God and revert to the passions of the flesh: impurity, evil desire, greed.

If we store up treasures for ourselves, and are not rich towards God, this profits neither ourselves, since we cannot take it with us when we die; nor does it profit our neighbour since we are not using it for the common good; nor does it profit God because we are not giving God the credit and the glory for His care for us.

If you think about it, all that we have comes from God, it is thanks to God, it belongs to God, and it is to God that we have to render account for what we have done with what He has given us.

We may be wealthy, as long as we do not think that it is our doing that has made us wealthy, as long as we ensure that we use our wealth to help our families and neighbours, as long as we render to God what is His.

We know what is important, we know what God demands of us. It is

summed up in two short commandments: Love your God and Love your neighbour. That is what our lives should consist of – the pursuit of all that builds up our relationship with God and with our neighbour.

'Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions'.

I started by saying that our readings today appear to be about riches and wealth and the way in which we deal with material possessions. This is indeed true, but is only half the story.

Our message today is concerned with how we deal with our material possessions in contrast to our relationship with God, and which comes first in our lives.

Are we worshipping God, or the things that we own? Which is more important to us? If the rich man had said to himself: 'Relax, eat, drink, be merry, and give thanks to God, and share His bountiful gifts with those less well off' then there would have been no problem.

Do we put God first, are we rich towards God? Or are we merely concerned with ourselves and our possessions? We have been raised with Christ, and we should be seeking the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

In Jesus' name

Amen