

Sermon - Hebrews 11. 1-3, 8-16; Luke 12.32-40

Shrouds have no pockets!

Not the most cheerful way of starting a sermon, I agree. So why am I doing it? It's because this rather graphic phrase sums up the parable which the lectionary set as last week's gospel, and on which Ken preached last Sunday. (And which is directly relevant to this week's Gospel.)

The parable in question is the Parable of the Rich Fool. The rich fool referred to is a farmer who after a particularly successful harvest decides to build bigger barns for his crops, then puts his feet up to "take life easy, eat, drink and be merry." However, God has different plans for him and tells him that that night will be his last on this earth, asking what then will happen to all his goods. Jesus' closing comment is: "This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich towards God."

Shrouds have no pockets, or to use a more well-known phrase: you can't take it with you.

No doubt you've already spotted the relationship of this to today's gospel, the opening of which is a continuation of Jesus' teaching on the proper use of resources.

Right from the start, Jesus links this with membership of the kingdom of God. Immediately prior to the start of our gospel, Jesus had urged his listeners to first seek this kingdom and in return they would be provided with the necessities of life. He makes exactly the same connections in what has become known as the Lord's Prayer, something that we say at least weekly and for many, daily :

Your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us our daily bread

God's kingdom is where his will is done, where people do things God's way, and in return they will have the resources they need for daily living. Sadly,

we're a long way from achieving that. In 1999, the CNN news organisation reported:

As scientists note the arrival of the six billionth human being on the planet, they are also warning that 16 percent of the world's population is consuming some 80 percent of its natural resources.

This morning's gospel opens with Jesus clearly talking to believers, those whom he refers to as the "little flock", whom he tells not to be fearful or anxious, "for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom." They have grasped what it means to be members of God's kingdom.

At this point it's important to understand that God's kingdom is not just some future kingdom. We can become members now, by doing things God's way. And God's way is what Jesus goes on to talk about next. Before we look at that, however, we should remember that many in Jesus' audience would have been far from wealthy. More likely they would have been just about managing to live from day to day.

However, there were clearly those listening to him who were somewhat better off, since Jesus encourages them to sell their possessions in order to assist the poor.

A word of warning, Jesus, in common with those of his own time, tends to speak in terms of black and white, to use exaggeration to make his point. If you think about it, it is clearly impractical for every Christian to sell all their possessions in order to support the poor, for that would make them dependent on those who hadn't done so.

And living off others is something that Paul, who worked as a tent maker, actively discourages in his letter to the church in Thessalonica:

"Anyone unwilling to work should not eat... such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus to do their work quietly and to earn their own living." (2 Thess. 3. 10-12)

May I just add that living off a pension qualifies as earning your own living. I'm sure that it will have been well-earned!

And there is evidence elsewhere in the Bible that the early Christians didn't understand Jesus as requiring every believer to live without possessions. So we have, for example, Lydia, whom Paul and his companions met in Philippi, Macedonia, who was clearly a wealthy woman and who, when she became a believer, opened her house to Paul and the others. (Acts 16. 14-15)

And Jesus and his disciples were supported by those who were not without means, for example those who provided Jesus with the donkey for his triumphal entry into Jerusalem and the room where he held the Last Supper.

What Jesus is getting at here is the need to use our resources wisely and generously.

It's told of John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church, that his rule of life was to *save* all he could and *give* all he could. When he was at Oxford in the 18th century, he had an income of £30 a year. He lived on £28 and gave £2 away. When his income increased to £120 a year, he still lived on £28 and gave the balance away.

Later Wesley, who had grown up in poverty, advised Christians that they should 'provide things needful for themselves and their family. The believer should make sure the family has "a sufficiency of plain, wholesome food to eat, and clean raiment to put on" as well as a place to live and enough to live on if something were to happen to the breadwinner.'

What lay behind Wesley's teaching was an experience he had when he was a lecturer at Oxford. He had just finished paying for some pictures for his room when one of the chambermaids came to his door. It was a cold winter day, and he noticed that she had nothing to protect her except a thin linen gown. He reached into his pocket to give her some money to buy a coat but found he had too little left. Immediately the thought struck him that the Lord was not pleased with the way he had spent his money. He asked himself, Will thy Master say, "Well done, good and faithful steward"? Thou hast adorned thy walls with the money which might have screened this poor creature from the cold!

Wesley went on to advise that after the Christian has provided for the family, the creditors, and the business, the next obligation is to use any money that is left to meet the needs of others.

To live in this way requires great faith, and that is what our reading from Hebrews focuses on, beginning with a definition of what is meant by faith: “being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.”

What that hope is is referred to several times in the second part of the reading. In verse 10, we’re told that Abraham was “looking forward to a city with foundations, whose architect and builder was God.” In verse 14, we’re told that these heroes of faith were looking for a country of their own, which in verse 16 is defined as “a better country – a heavenly one,” and that God has “prepared a city for them.”

And that hope is ours, too, for what in Hebrews is referred to as a country or a city, is the New Jerusalem of the Book of Revelation and the Kingdom of God of our Gospel reading.

I said earlier that the Kingdom of God is not just some future kingdom, and that’s true - we can start living by the values of God’s kingdom in the here and now - but it is clear that from today’s Gospel and elsewhere in the New Testament that it will only come in its fullness when Jesus returns as King and Judge, what we call the Second Coming.

And, that is what the second part of our Gospel is all about.

In the parable about the men waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet, we’re told that if he finds them watching out for his return, he will reward them by serving them at table.

How likely is that do you think?

In the secular world of Jesus’ day and our day, not very, I would say. But in the upside down world of God’s kingdom, the one in which we’re called to love our enemies and to turn the other cheek, much more likely. Indeed, Jesus demonstrated this when he washed his disciples’ feet at the Last Supper.

The message here is that we must be ready for the Second Coming at any time, for “the Son of man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.” For

most of us that meeting with Jesus will probably be when we pass from this world to the next, which is why our Catholic friends call on Mary to intercede for us now and at the hour of our death.

And this brings us back to the beginning and how we live out our faith, “for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” A few chapters on from our Gospel, Luke records Jesus as saying, “You cannot serve both God and Money”

But what our Gospel today makes clear is that you can serve God *with* money. Amen.