

Sermon Notes

St Mark's Anglican Church
South Hurstville

Pentecost 10
5 August 2007

Preacher
The Reverend Chris Albany
Rector

Readings: Hosea 11.1-11; Psalm 107.1-9,43; Colossians 3.1-11; Luke 12. 13-21

Give Life

In John Marsden's collection of essays from 100 eminent Australians, 'This I Believe' Bishop Brian Farran now Bishop of Newcastle says"

"I long that I might be a life-giver. I long that the church to which I have given my working life might passionately be a life-giver".

Is It? Is that your experience of the church and of faith. I hope so - for above all else that is what the Gospel is all about - life - life in abundance. Life, hope, joy - despite the woundedness, the pain, the confusion, the sadness that is so often our experience as we journey through this world.

It is not always so - for some the church is deadly, life denying - death dealing rather than life-giving. Sometimes just because we fail to connect. We seem to be irrelevant the issues that people have to contend with in their everyday world. As one wag has put it "We're so heavenly minded that we're of no earthly use." So the church comes across as boring - deadly so - in the often expressed complaint of the young. Sometimes it is more to do with our rigidity - our lack of openness - our taking of ourselves too seriously. The insistence that everyone fit a particular mode of faith and practice. That there really is only one way to be a Christian - that faith has to be expressed in a particular way. So pressure is put on people to conform, to use the right jargon, with the suggestion that one is not really a proper Christian if one:

- can not talk about a particular moment of conversion
- or can not speak in tongues
- or has not been baptised by immersion as an adult
- or...whatever it is that our particular group holds as important

Our faith/theology can be life-giving or death dealing. Or as Helmut Thielicke the German Theologian puts it in "A small exercise for Young Theologians"

"It can be sacred theology or diabolical theology. That depends on the hearts and hands who further it. But which of the two it cannot necessarily be seen by the fact that it is in one case orthodox and in the other heretical. I don't believe that God is a fussy fault finder in theological ideas. The one who provides forgiveness for a sinful life will also surely be a generous judge of theological reflections. Even an orthodox theologian can be spiritually dead while perhaps a heretic crawls on forbidden bypaths to the sources of life." Isn't that a delightful phrase : Even an orthodox theologian can be spiritually dead while perhaps a heretic crawls on forbidden bypaths to the sources of life.

Over the past 2 days, two dozen of us have spent time with John Barnes from the Church Army looking at what it is we are on about as church and how we might more effectively take up our calling to be a life giving community. It was a stimulating, challenging, empowering time together as we focused on the changes that have happened in our life-time, especially since the mid 1960's as the church has again moved to the margins of society from the central place it had through the centuries of Christendom. Those changes mean we have to re-discover the ways and methods of Jesus and the early church if we are going to address the growing gap between church and society. To find ways to reconnect, to share the "good news", our experience of transformation, of being

given life! I am not going to say more today, those of us who took part in the workshops need time to prayerfully reflect and think through the implications for us here at St. Mark's. But I share Brian Farran's longing, and it was obvious the other do also – that the church might passionately be a life giver.

It is precisely this contrast between life-giving theology and life denying or death dealing theology which is presented to us by Jesus in his various disputes between the scribes and the Pharisees throughout the Gospels. We see it too in this Gospel incident we have just heard read to us. There is a selfishness which is death dealing in both the initial request of the man asking Jesus to judge in his favour and also in the rich man in the parable Jesus tells.

Underlying this story we see Jesus confronting the crude materialism of the wealthy and powerful concerned only with self, the man in the parable is indeed a person much to be pitied. (by implication his selfish pursuit of wealth has destroyed his capacity to maintain any abiding human relationships. He has no-one to share his soul, and worst of all, he does not even know he has a problem!) Kenneth Bailey in his commentary on the Lucan parables “Through Peasant Eyes” says that Jesus here is dealing with the Middle East's most sensitive problem, both then and now, namely a cry for justice over the division of land. (page 59) Rather than a selfish pre-occupation in what is mine, and focusing on accumulating wealth for oneself Jesus call is always outward looking – to be concerned with being rich towards God. ?

What does it mean to be rich towards God? As I look at the Gospels it seems to me that Jesus constantly suggests that it entails seeking the welfare of the other before Self. We see that when a ruler asks “What is necessary to gain Eternal Life?” After some dialogue Jesus tells the Parable of the Good Samaritan and then says “Go and do the same!” What is required is a costly identification with other – with our society. This means, as we discussed yesterday at our workshop, taking the time to build relationships, to discover the needs and concerns of people. One can only really do that by going and meeting on their own ground, we can no longer expect them to come to us and slot into our activities. It will take time and real discernment to begin to find appropriate ways of doing that.

Kenneth Bailey powerfully illustrates the values and principles of the Gospel, which need to undergird all our activities and our being, by finishing his commentary on this morning's Gospel passage in this way :

“As we have indicated, the cry for justice over the division of land is the Middle East's most sensitive problem. In the following prose-poem the present writer has tried to apply the methodology used by Jesus in this passage. Today two voices cry out in the Middle East for a just division of the “inheritance.”

What answer can Christians give? Like this parable in Luke 12, the intent of the following is to suggest a different perspective from which an answer could perhaps emerge.

RESURRECTION

(Ode on a Burning Tank : The Holy Lands, October 1973)

***I am a voice,
The voice of spilt blood
crying from the land.***

***The life is in the blood
And for years my life flowed in the veins of a young man.
My voice was heard through his voice, and my life was his life.***

*Then our volcano erupted
And for a series of numbing days
All human voices were silenced
Amid the roar of the heavy guns,
The harsh clank of tank tracks, the bone-jarring shudder of sonic booms,
As gladiators with million-dollar swords
killed each other high in the sky.*

*Then suddenly --- suddenly
There was the swish of a rocket launcher ---
a dirty yellow flash ---
all hell roared.
The clanking of the great tracks stopped.
My young man staggered screaming from his inferno,
His body twitched and flopped in the sand*

*And I was split into the earth ---
Into the holy earth
of the Holy Land.*

*The battle moved on.
The wounded vehicles burned,
scorched,
and cooled.
The “meat wagons” carried the bodies away as
The chill of the desert night
Settled on the ridge and dune,
And I stiffened and blackened in the sand.*

*And then --- and then
As the timeless silence
Of the now scarred desert returned,
There --- there congealed in the land,
In the land of prophet, priest and king ---
I heard a voice ---
A voice from deep in the land,
A voice from an ageless age, a voice from other blood
Once shed violently in the land.*

*The voice told me this ancient story:
Precious blood intoned this ancient tale.*

*“A certain man had two sons.
One was rich and the other was poor.
The rich son had no children
While the poor son was blessed with many sons and many daughters.
In time the father fell ill. He was sure he would not live through the week
So on Saturday he called his sons to his side
And gave each of them half of the land of their inheritance.
Then he died.*

*Before sundown the sons buried their father with respect
A custom requires.*

*That night the rich son could not sleep.
He said to himself,
'What my father did was not just.
I am rich, my brother is poor.
I have bread enough and to spare,
While my brother's children eat one day
And trust God for the next.
I must move the landmark which our father has set in the middle of the land
So that my brother will have the greater share.
Ah --- but he must not see me.
If he sees me he will be shamed.
I must arise early in the morning before it is dawn and move the landmark!'
With this he fell asleep
And his sleep was secure and peaceful.*

*Meanwhile, the poor brother could not sleep.
As he lay restless on his bed he said to himself,
'What my father did was not just,*

*Here I am surrounded by the joy of many sons and many daughters
While my brother daily faces the shame
Of having o sons to carry on his name
and no daughters to comfort him in his old age.
He should have the land pf our fathers.
Perhaps this will inn part compensate him
for his indescribable poverty.
Ah --- but if I give it to him he will be shamed.
I must awake early in the morning before it is dawn
And move the landmark which our father has set!'
With this he went to sleep
And his sleep was secure and peaceful.*

*On the first day of the week ---
Very early in the morning,
A long time before it was day,
The two brothers met at the ancient land-marker.
They fell with tears into each other's arms.
And on that spot was built the city of Jerusalem." Kenneth Bailey (p 71-73 of "Through Peasant
Eyes – More Lucan parables" published by Eerdmans 1980)*

Would it were so! Would that you and I; that all people would have the wit, the wisdom, the compassion to so live and act in all our relationships especially where there is conflict, or potential for conflict and in so doing give life!