

Live life light

A sermon preached by Revd Gavin Knight, Vicar of St. Michael & All Angels Summertown on Trinity 10, Sun 31 July 2016 in St Peter's Wolvercote *'Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.'* – Luke 12: 15

My experience of moving from parish to parish is obviously associated with moving the family as well and all of the associated problems and challenges that this brings – moving schools, changing jobs (for Jo), getting connected with phones and internet, energy suppliers, council waste and recycling schemes, making new friends. The list goes on. But one of the most critical challenges at both ends of the moving process is the disposal of the junk and detritus which has been gathering for x number of years. And as I said, this is a challenge not only on departure, it is a challenge with an arrival as well. Not only am I referring to domestic junk but also the mess which gathers over the years in churches and church halls. I remember one particular parish that I moved in to had gathered up years and years of rubbish. Well, that's not strictly true. I thought it was rubbish but I was told by a variety of different people how important each and every item was, that the church would not manage without it!

At times it seems to me that churches are sighing under the sheer weight of the stuff which they carry. And as a new broom going into a parish on several occasions, I have had the task of not so much cleaning things away but lightening the load, dare I say, chucking things out. My motto is that Christians should live life light!

And that's a good motto for today's gospel: 'live life light.' This is a parable not only about the danger of materialism, but also about the need for spiritual development. The gospel starts with a challenge to Jesus by a frustrated follower – how he might convince his brother to divide his inheritance fairly. It was out of this challenge that Jesus sets up the parable which demonstrates the material and spiritual dangers of selfishness. I am sure that we all know the story, how the rich land owner produces a generous crop and how he attempts to accommodate the surplus harvest by investing in newer, bigger barns to store the produce. In light of today's economic systems, some would congratulate the land owner on his skill and land management, his determination to invest in plant and his planning for future provision. He is enterprising and calculating, a very sound manager.

Others, however, like Jesus, might see this economic plan as a form of greed and control. There is no sign of gratitude from the rich land owner about the generosity of creation in producing this crop. There is no sense of the need of others in this scenario. The crop must have been the work of a collective, a group of workers. As I said, this is a parable about the danger of selfishness, of a mind-set based on me, myself, I. This is incongruous to Jesus because the rich man is living falsely. The crop does not belong to him, neither does the wealth it creates belong to him. And the riches are not his to keep. The farmer is mortal, he will not be able to take his riches with him into death, he is a fool if he thinks he can!

Jesus is saying, my followers should learn to 'live life light!' That is the Christian way. Don't be straining under the weight of riches and possessions. In the gospels Jesus teaches his followers to live life light. Trust in God's generosity. Similarly, trust in God's grace to be given when God deems the time is right.

Jesus challenges not only our material aspirations, our sense of gratitude, our relationship with creation but he provides us with a warning regarding our spiritual development – or lack of it. The Christian prayer tradition has for over two thousand years understood that we are not able to pray and relate with God if we are overwhelmed by all the stuff that clutters our lives. The prayer tradition which Jesus sets out in the gospel and which is consolidated by the early church is one of emptiness and space. Most importantly we are led to understand that we don't need much to pray, in fact less is more. The simple fact is that we cannot have space for God if we are already filled by our own stuff. We need to take the harvest out of the barn in order to fill it with God's spirit. It is not we who pray but it is God's spirit that prays in us. So, the objective in our prayer life is to come to God, hungry and empty. God is gracious to fill us with his Spirit and prays in us and through us. We don't have magic words, big, grand gestures and phrases which satisfy God – that's the wrong way round. It is God who satisfies us with his Spirit, we are filled by his grace and mercy. But the danger is that we might not experience this relationship of trust because we are too busy accumulating, consuming, possessing, hoarding the things that do not bring us health. We need to learn to live life light.

Is there also a lesson here for our world and the appalling atrocities which we have been experiencing? The more encumbered we become the less able we are to react and change and resource the world. If our Church is heavy, over-fed, and thinking only of its own survival, it will only be a matter of time until it becomes isolated and dies. If we think of the barns in the gospel as metaphorical churches, we will understand that they need to be unfilled in order for God's people to enter. I wonder what is filling our churches today, what prevents those outside from coming inside. But more seriously, If we as church people are trapped by the amount of stuff in our barns that we cannot get out, what an indictment this is upon the mission of the church! What prevents us from reaching out? What is it that hinders our plan to live life light?

A church which is heavy and full is not healthy and cannot be an instrument of God's grace. The church is called to be an agent of change in the world today. In the light of the continuing terrorist outrages, the church needs to be able to manoeuvre, move freely and place itself where the greatest need is. Far from being entrenched, Christians today are being called to serve the world, through acts of charity, through active signs of forgiveness, through the sharing of the world's resources, through the power of prayer, through simply living well with our neighbours, through community engagement. We need space to do this, we need God's grace to live life light. Like the rich man, our lives are being demanded of us. Unlike the rich man our hope is to give our very selves to others. That is our Christian vocation – to live through these massacres and persecutions – to live selflessly, to pray on empty, to share what we have, giving thanks to God our Father for all the good gifts that we receive. Live life light.

Amen.