

Kingdom priorities

A sermon preached by the *Revd Dr Mark Butchers* at the 8.00am service at St Peter's, Wolvercote on Sunday 27th February 2011

Matthew 6: vv 25-34

Today's Gospel raises some radical questions. If we are to have no thought for the morrow, is it right to save? Is it right to be part of a pension scheme? I do and I am, so am I therefore going against Jesus' teaching?

Or should we say, this Gospel is all fantasy. We may all like to live with no thought for the morrow, but the real world isn't like that, especially if you have children who are dependent upon you. You have to be sensible.

So how are we to interpret Jesus' words this morning? Hackneyed though it is, we do need to bear in mind the context in which Jesus was speaking. It seems likely that he was expecting the coming of God's Kingdom. The world as he knew it was soon to end, so in that context you didn't need to look too far ahead. Saving was pointless. You could tell people just to focus on the here and now. Obviously though the world did not end and we now live in a different age, so we have to interpret this Gospel in that different context.

Nonetheless there is a challenge in Jesus' teaching that is relevant in every place and every age: what are our priorities? Are they money and more money, possessions and more possessions? Or do we seek first the Kingdom of God and God's righteousness: justice, love, compassion, generosity to others? Is our focus selfish me-first accumulation or selfless outward-looking concern for others?

There is another story in the Bible: the Parable of the Rich Fool. He is the rich farmer who builds bigger and better barns to store his wealth. The implication is that his focus is always just himself and his future comfort. Just when at last he feels he has enough and can retire and relax, he dies.

The parable says to me that there is a cost to concentration on selfish accumulation for ourselves. We may not die physically, we may enjoy the pleasures of a wealthy lifestyle. But at what cost? Will there have been a spiritual death? A closing off to God and others?

I always remember talking with someone about city stockbrokers and the vast salaries they earn. I said that in my Walter Mitty moments I wondered whether I should have done that, earned a fortune, retired at 30 and then devoted the rest of my life to the church/good works or whatever. The person I was speaking to said with great wisdom and perception – yes, but by then you'd have been bitten. And she was right. There was a high probability that I'd have been sucked into a me-first, money-generating, money-spending lifestyle, which it would have been difficult to escape. Phase 2 would probably have never happened. Jesus was all too well aware of this, which is why he urges us in this morning's Gospel to focus our priorities on seeking the Kingdom of God and all the qualities of compassion, love, justice and peace which are central to it. Make those your first priority and your spiritual side will live, flourish, grow. Make selfish accumulation your first priority and your spiritual side is likely to wither and die.

There's one more crucial part of this passage. Jesus says 'strive first for the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.' What are we to make of that last bit – 'all these things will be given to you as well'? It implies that, though we are not making them a priority, our physical needs will be looked after. It is an extraordinary thing to say, and

there is no logical reason why it should happen. But I believe it does, for two reasons, one of which I can explain and one I can't.

The one I can explain is this: if God's Kingdom is our priority rather than the accumulation of wealth, then we will find that we will be satisfied with less. There will be an inner shift on the inside, and we will hanker not for that new sports car, or that bigger house, but rather for a stronger community, a vibrant Church, solutions to social problems. If those are our priorities, the pursuit of luxuries, of more and more, will fade within us. We will be happier with less, more content with what we have, more realistic about what we really need.

The other reason, the one I can't explain is that I've just found in my experience that when people do try to put God's kingdom first, the financial side falls into place. People say there has always been enough to live on – not overmuch, but enough.

So I think I want to take a middle way with this Gospel. I want to say that because we may well live lives that are 70/80/120 years long, it is alright to save and have pension plans. The world may end tomorrow, but we have to plan as if it won't!

But I also want to take very seriously Jesus' teaching about putting God's priorities first, not the accumulation of more and more and more. That has consequences for the sort of people we become, what we are content with, and the depth or shallowness of our relationship with God.

Amen.