

Rich in the sight of God

5 8 07

‘Friend, who set me to be judge or arbitrator over you?’ Luke 12 v14

It is all right to say no. Just because someone asks you to do something, you don’t have to say yes. Sometimes, saying no can be the right thing to do, the mature and appropriate response to a request.

Today’s gospel is a good illustration of the point. Jesus is asked by a man to rule in a case where one brother is refusing to share the family property equitably with his sibling, presumably on the death of their father. It sounds like the revenge of the prodigal son’s elder brother. You may well wonder why the man is approaching Jesus with this request for justice. Well, it is a compliment that Jesus is perceived to be a fair, just man. It also reflects the culture in which they lived where civil disputes were often settled by religious leaders. One of a religious leader’s possible titles at the time of Jesus is Lawyer for this is just what they were, experts in Torah, the Jewish law. So there would be no surprise among the original audience that the man should make this request, that Jesus judge between him and his brother.

But Jesus refuses to do so? Why? Because he wants the brothers to reach an amicable, fraternal decision by themselves. Jesus is not concerned so much as to make a specific judgement in an individual case, like the one he being asked to rule on, but rather he wants to give us the principles by which to act.

And so he tells a story, a parable, the Parable of the Foolish Landowner. The man is rich and successful, a prosperous farmer but he is presented with an interesting problem: his harvest exceeds his capacity to store his crops. His solution: to tear down his old inadequate plant and to replace the barns with bigger better ones in which he can safely store his wealth then sit back to relax, eat, drink and be merry. Sounds good? Actually no, because he had not factored in the fact that he is mortal and no matter how much we possess, we cannot buy immortality for sooner or later we must die. Well, it's sooner in his case.

Now the parable is fascinating for it is, as I indicated, Jesus' attempt to provide the working principle that should inform the brothers' relationship and their equitable division of their family property. What it teaches us is not that property and goods are in themselves wrong but how we use them might be. The Landowner viewed his surplus harvest in terms of a personal storage problem: actually, he was being challenged to share his wealth with those who have not: for example, the poor and the hungry; the widow and the orphan. Seen from a selfish point of view, the landowner is only interested in a management solution that will give him a retirement funded by wealth he personally will never be able to exhaust. If wealth is shared by good stewardship, then we all share the prosperity of the land. If both brothers were informed by the same spirit of generous love, then there would be no rancour between them. The fact is we don't know the facts of the dispute between the brothers and both may be to blame being motivated by greed rather than the true spirit of Fraternité.

So though Jesus has refused to act as the judge in a specific dispute, he has nonetheless given the man in the crowd who asked him to do so, something far more valuable than simply his arbitration. He has given the man and us the principle by which to act so that he and we can become autonomous moral agents in our own right; in other words, we can act like mature thinking adults taking responsible decisions for ourselves and living the good life

So let me leave you with the thought that sometimes it can be okay to say no and that we should be living lives where we are good stewards of that with which God has blessed us.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's Dinard

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A: Sermon 16: Rich

