

A question of greed

4 8 13

Let your merciful ears, O Lord,
be open to the prayers of your humble servants;
and that they may obtain their petitions
make them to ask such things as please you;

Our text may be found in Luke chapter 12 and verse 15:

**‘Take care ! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed:
for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.’**

Do you remember the 1968 film of ‘Oliver Twist’, ‘Oliver’, the musical version by Lionel Bart of the Dickens’ novel starring Ron Moody as Fagin, Oliver Reed as Bill Sykes, Jack Wilde as an impish Artful Dodger and a blond Mark Lester in the title role, nervously holding up his empty breakfast bowl to Harry Secombe’s Mr Bumble and asking in a voice trembling with apprehension: ‘Please sir, I want some more’ ?

More ? . . . More ? . . . Who doesn’t want more ? In little Oliver’s case, the young, growing boy is clearly hungry, if not underfed, and his need is genuine and obvious. Our needs may not be so convincing. True, we do live in a time of increasing austerity, a time of sustained recession where real living standards are falling, where unemployment especially among the young is rising, where food banks are a daily fact of life for some and where many of us – even here in France

– are having to tighten our belts. But is what we say we need simply a matter of greed ?

The case we hear about in today's gospel is fascinating. A voice in the crowd asks Jesus to do something for him. He says, 'Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.' Nice one. It's only what is right and proper – a fair division of the estate of the late father among his sons. I'm guessing the voice is that of a younger brother but we can't know for sure though the older brother is the one more likely to be, de facto, in charge. The Prodigal Son gets his share of the family fortune even before his father dies and Jacob tricks his father Isaac into giving him his brother, Esau's, blessing ! But in a Jewish world of justice informed by the Torah, what the younger brother is asking Jesus to do does seem reasonable.

Surprisingly, Jesus does not respond positively to the brother's request: 'Friend who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you ?' Nice one. The trap is that the man, in desperation, is asking Jesus to do something that he is not officially appointed to do – be a judge in a religious court, a Beth Din, to settle a family dispute. True, Jesus is a rabbi, a teacher, an interpreter of the Law but the trap here is that by the flattery of seeming respect, Jesus will be inveigled into getting involved in a dispute that is not part of his mission. Here the lesson for us is implicit.

But the lesson that is explicit is our text today, the very next thing that Jesus says:

‘Take care ! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed: for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.’ It is a timely reminder to us of his unambiguous teaching on material possessions and on true wealth: that none of us can live by bread alone (Matthew 4 v4); that none of us should be anxious about what we will eat or what we will drink or what we will wear (Matthew 6 v31); that we should all invest our real and sustained efforts in the love of God and in the love of our neighbour as we should love ourselves (Matthew 22 v37–40).

And to bring the point home to his audience, if not to the younger brother who would, I guess, still like to get his hands on his fair share of his father’s estate, Jesus tells us a simple parable: the story of a rich landowner whose crops are so abundant that he no longer has sufficient room to store them in his barns. So instead of sharing his good fortune with those less fortunate, he embarks on a major redevelopment of his barns so that he can store his crops for his own benefit. Not good because he dies that very night ! He has failed not only to benefit personally from his greed but, most especially, he has also failed to benefit others by sharing what he has.

Great story; good principle; but are we listening ? The real problem with greed is one simply cannot get enough of whatever it is that we want at the time. The trick with being unselfish is that often and ultimately, it produces the best results – not only for others but for us too ! But what do you think ?

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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G: Sermons 28 : Question of greed

