

Sermon for Sunday 31 July

Seventh Sunday after Trinity

Hosea 11: 1 – 11; Colossians 3: 1 – 11; Luke 12: 13 – 21

I wonder what are our greatest pre-occupations at present? For a while I suspect for many of us it was the war in Ukraine. And Covid is still very much around. As I was walking down Church Road last Thursday evening to go to the Holiday Club barbecue there was ash from the fire on the heath dropping on me; I was forcibly reminded that climate change is here – right here with us in Woburn Sands – as if we didn't know that from the very recent record temperatures we've endured. Or perhaps we are more concerned looking forwards about inflation, fuel prices and the policies of our next Prime Minister. Never mind other concerns for our families or our health. It feels as if all sorts of things are changing very fast. The world seems a less stable place than before. And we have constant access to the news if we want it. It's easy to feel pulled about, disturbed, anxious,

powerless. So how do we live in such uncertain times?

Our readings this morning speak into all of this – in quite challenging ways. Here's a quote from our second reading:

“So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth,” (Colossians 3: 1 – 2a)

“seek the things that are above,...set your minds on things that are above”. Sounds like good advice – but how on earth do we do that?

Our Gospel reading from Luke gives us a negative example to think about. Someone who definitely doesn't set his mind on the things that are above. The story of a prosperous farmer who decides to get organised for a long and carefree retirement. So he works hard to store up everything he needs for a comfortable life in the future. Tearing down barns and building bigger ones. Hoarding his produce for himself.

But what he doesn't know is that he isn't going to live long enough to enjoy the fruits of his labour. Jesus tells the story against greed. Against spending all one's energy on oneself and not being rich towards God. Against the kind of drivenness that makes it impossible to enjoy living in the present. People who behave like this don't usually make those around them very happy, because they are never content with what they have. And they can't relax. The kind of happiness they seek turns out to be an illusion. The rich farmer would have experienced true happiness if he had shared his wealth and enjoyed it during his lifetime. As Jesus says, "one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions". (Luke 12:15).

And of course it's not just about possessions. We can be greedy about other things too – our time, for example. The tragedy of the rich farmer is that he never really lived because he didn't live for others.

"seek the things that are above" – but what is above? Our first reading from Hosea gives us

the most wonderful picture of what is above – of what God is like. Anyone who thinks that the God of the Old Testament is distant and forbidding should read this passage. He talks about His tender love for His people Israel, the love of a parent for a child "Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms; ...I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks." – picture that – how vivid it is – "I bent down to them and fed them" (Hosea 11: 3 – 4). Despite their unfaithfulness to Him, God will not punish "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel?" God's love trumps His sense of justice, and He forgives, and forgives and forgives.....

That is the God we worship, the one who sent Jesus to die for us and to save us from ourselves.

So, we can choose live our lives according the reality of God's tender love expressed most fully in Jesus – or according to the many illusions that the world offers us. To follow the way of Jesus is demanding – put me first, says Jesus – even

before the people you love most in the world; forgive; turn the other cheek; go the extra mile; pray for those who persecute you. And especially relevant to our uncertain times - but just as difficult - do not be afraid; trust me; do not be anxious; live in the present, I'll take care of the future.

I wonder what particular thing God is saying to you just now?

Of course, we fail all the time, only Jesus was able to live completely like this. But every step we take that reflects the reality of God's love in us and for us. Every step we take in faith, the image of God in us becomes a little clearer. We grow nearer to who God made us to be.

Later in our service we shall be singing that lovely hymn "Take my life and let it be consecrated Lord to thee". It's a very hard hymn to sing and really mean it. But Jesus can use what we are able and willing to give, and He will work wonders with that.

"seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God."

Amen

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