Sermon for 18th in Ordinary Year C

Readings: Hosea 11:1-11; Colossians 3:1-11; Luke 12:13-21

i

*Nelson* was a sleek black rabbit I bought for a few shillings from a mate at school. He was a splendid buck with a shiny black coat with steel grey underneath. But no matter how I fed and pampered him, *Nelson* remained a cantankerous bully who would head-butt the hand that proffered the carrot.

I sold him on in the end. There was nothing I could do to win his trust and affection.

Hosea suggests God has had a similarly frustrating time with Israel. God brought them out of Egypt like a parent would lead a toddler, “on the cords of human kindness” (v4). Yet they have gone after Baal and turned away from their loving God.

But unlike my irritation with *Nelson* the rabbit, God cannot turn away from Israel. God’s heart burns with compassion. His love always overcomes his anger. God keeps on loving, hoping, waiting, chasing and longing far past the point when our weaker human hearts have given up in despair.

Such a concept of God’s love, *hesed* in Hebrew, sets the tone for the most audacious act of all-consuming love in history: the incarnation of Jesus Christ, “our God contracted to a span” as the words of the hymn put it.

So what is the nature of Israel’s sins in Hosea’s day?

Apostasy, for starters: Israel has gone over to Baal (v2). Secondly, they have compromised with the evil, corrupt regimes of Assyria and Egypt simply for material gain through trade (Hosea 12:1). Thirdly, they defraud the poor with false weights and measures (Hosea 12:6) and to cap it all they mistake their worldly success with spiritual merit:

Ephraim boasts, ‘I am very rich; I have become wealthy. With all my wealth they will not find in me any iniquity or sin” (Hosea 12:8).

Some Psalms and other OT passages can be read to support the view that material wealth is a sign of God’s favour. It is from such passages that the so-called “prosperity Gospel” is derived. We should note that when the disciples first hear Jesus say that the rich will find it hard to enter the kingdom, that it would be easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, they are surprised because it goes against this widely held assumption (Mark 10:25-26).

It is a tendency we still encounter today; often we make moral judgements about people based on their material wealth. It is all too easy to dismiss the poor as simply feckless and lazy. When God judges our worth he will be weighing our hearts, not our wallets.

ii

The man who approaches Jesus to act as a fair, independent judge between him and his brother shows Jesus was a publicly acknowledged religious leader who might be called upon to exercise sound and discerning judgment. He didn’t get the response he was hoping for.

Jesus refuses to act as a judge on matters of such worldliness as property rights. It isn’t quite clear why the man had an issue with his brother, but it probably indicates that he wanted his share of the inheritance which according to Jewish law was rightfully his due, but which his brother was refusing to share and wanted to keep for himself.

Jesus, after refusing to get involved in the dispute, uses the request as an opportunity to speak about the dangers of greed and a reliance on worldly wealth in general.

The danger is not the possession of worldly wealth in itself, but the attitude a person has towards such wealth. If attaining worldly wealth becomes an obsession, greed would be an appropriate description. But alongside the mere accumulation of worldly possessions is the danger that it fools the rich person into thinking that their life is going well, that all that is necessary is being done, whilst their spiritual poverty and their debts of sin are not being addressed. “Life does not consist in the abundance of possessions”, says Jesus.

There is also an important political and theological message within this passage.

The brothers’ dispute over inheritance most likely involves land. Land is not a merely commercial matter in Israel, as it is for most Westerners today – for Israel the land was about the sacred gift of the Promised Land to Abraham and his descendants. Modern Israel is still living with the consequences of that tradition.

It would be shocking to hear a respected rabbi such as Jesus declare that he wasn’t interested in sorting out squabbles about land – land was a sacred gift. How could Jesus say he wasn’t interested?

The point is that Jesus is a theological revolutionary. He wants people to abandon their obsession with physical land and physical boundaries and material wealth because the kingdom is not about physical territory on a map, but about a spiritual kingdom in which people belong not by right of birth, but by being born again through the Holy Spirit into a new people of Israel, into a kingdom that knows no boundaries of space or time or ethnicity.

We can now appreciate the political and theological undertones to the parable about the rich fool who built his ever-bigger barns to store his grain, but who was totally unprepared when he had to leave his earthly life behind and stand, as a pauper, before God.

On the surface, yes, this parable is also a warning about the spiritually deadening nature of materialism and in today’s secular, materialist society that is a message that needs repeating loud and clear.

However, the parable also has a theological and political application which we should not overlook.

The fool who builds ever bigger barns to store his grain is like the Israel of Jesus’ day; they obsess about regaining control over their land, freeing themselves from Rome, re-asserting their sovereignty and their former frontiers, and purifying their nation in a similar way they had done when they returned from Exile.

This political, materialistic and worldly understanding of Israel’s divine calling will lead them inevitably to confrontation with Rome and a war in which they will lose even what they have. Jesus can see this coming. Within 30 years of the crucifixion it is exactly what happened.

This is their last chance to enter the real kingdom and he, Jesus, is the narrow gate by which people must enter. The gate is as wide as the cross. Material and political power are more of a hindrance than a help in finding your way into the true kingdom of God.

iii

Paul, for one, has understood what Jesus said. In his *Letter to the Colossians*, Paul instructs the Church along these same lines, saying “Set you minds on things above, not on earthly things” (Col 3:2).

Paul goes on to list some of the matters he considers to be too earthly for our spiritual good. He starts off, somewhat unfortunately in terms of some of its later effects, with an obsession about sex. That warning is again worth repeating in today’s Western societies especially. Obsession with sex is one thing; that is not the same as saying sexual desire itself is sinful and much harm has been done by the Church’s conflation of sexual desire and sin, especially in relation to sexuality and women.

Paul then goes on to mention material greed which is a form of idolatry when material wealth becomes more important in our lives than our duties to God and neighbour.

He then lists a number of attitudes that are contrary to the spirit of the kingdom: anger, rage, malice, slander, filthy language, deceit and closes today’s passage with a reaffirmation that the kingdom no longer looks at men and women according to their earthly status such as Greek, or Jew, barbarian or Scythian, slave or free, but as equal members of a new nation, the new Israel.

Living contentedly and thankfully and peacefully in this world is a vision of how this life should be lived which we find in the Garden of Eden story. Yet we know that from the beginning it has never been easy. Since Adam and Eve refused to see the spiritual significance of the apple and only judged it from its material point of view, as being good to eat, humanity has struggled to keep alive the human spirit in the face of such worldly pleasures.

Jesus reminds us how vital it is to live in the world and not according to the world. No one, I suspect, has ever found that easy.

**Rev Dr Trevor Hoggard – July 2015**