

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – 7th Sunday after Trinity

31st July 2022

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

Ten days ago, a single EuroMillions ticket holder won the largest amount that has ever been won on a lottery in the United Kingdom: £195 million (or around €200 million). Just think what you could do with that sort of amount.

In my previous life as a lawyer, very occasionally I would come across people within the category the media describe as 'super-rich'. (I should add that most of my clients did not fall within that category and lived quite ordinary lives.) But the encounter made me aware that the sort of fortune which the new lottery winner is learning to live with can bring with it a surprising amount of anxiety. An amount of wealth which for most people would be regarded as solving all of life's practical problems can be experienced as a burden, a source of fear – fear of losing it, fear of not living up to the expectations of the people who had generated the wealth, fear of the people with whom they might form loving relationships because they do not know if they can trust their motives.

Our Gospel reading this morning is part of a series of reflections by Jesus about the problems that arise when we feel over-anxious. It is very much a problem of our time. We live in a society that in all sorts of ways is currently displaying a profound sense of insecurity. Jesus highlights how one of our instinctive responses to this sort of anxiety is to seek security in the things around us,

especially material possessions as a means of safeguarding our future. In the passage that immediately follows the parable of the rich man with the barns, he encourages us instead to note how the birds of the air and the flowers of the field are looked after within the created order, and that we should take our cue from them in order to stress less about our own security. For one problem is that, as humans, we tend to turn means into ends, making our possessions objects of desire in their own right.

The Gospel does not expect us to never to be anxious, but it does offer a contrast between normal worry and undue self-concern. Instead of being anxious about our own security, we are invited to trust the God of love and to live out the values of God. The place where the values of God are fully lived out is what Jesus refers to as the Kingdom of Heaven – living in a dynamic of love which brings, amongst other benefits, freedom from fear. For as the first Letter of John puts it, ‘There is no fear in love. Perfect love casts out fear.’

If we look at this morning’s parable in more detail, it’s noticeable how isolated the man in the story has become. He was already rich before the abundant crops came along. He thinks ‘to himself’ that he will build bigger barns; there appears to be no one else to have the conversation with. Notice how many times the first person pronoun occurs: ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’... “I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.” It’s a solitary, self-absorbed conversation. And the irony is that he appears to have no one to eat, drink and be merry with. He has insulated himself from any relationship that might jeopardise his security, and in the process he has

jeopardised the one that matters most – his relationship with God. What is the point of having material security if you have sacrificed all your relationships to get it? Generosity and taking the risk on loving is a better form of investment.

This is ancient wisdom. There's an old rabbinic story known as the tale of the long spoons, in which someone asks God to be shown heaven and hell. They are shown into a room with a table filled with a sumptuous feast, and a lot of very glum people sitting round it. God explains: 'This is hell.' 'Why are they looking so miserable?' 'Well, there is only one rule here: they have to use spoons that are six feet long and they are only allowed to hold them by the end of the handle. So they can't get the food into their mouths.' God then shows the enquirer into another room, where there is another table. 'This is heaven.' The people sitting round it are chatting happily in anticipation of the feast about to begin. 'I get it' the enquirer says: 'they don't have the rule about using the end of the handle of the spoon here.' 'Oh, it's the same rule', says God. 'The difference here is that they have learned that if you put food into someone else's mouth, they will do the same for you.'

If we stop to think about it, all the things that matter most to us in life - love, relationship, trust, wisdom, justice – increase as we share them. By contrast, with wealth and power there's a sense around that if someone else has more, I must have less. It generates the fear of scarcity that underlies so much aggressiveness in human behaviour. Instead, the qualities of the Kingdom of heaven, which allow us to relate more deeply to God, ourselves and others, are rich enough for both giver and receiver to benefit.

The question this parable asks of us is: where do our true priorities lie? Of course we wish to provide for ourselves and our families. Of course we are anxious about the future – these are worrying times. But there is also a question of responsibility to those in need, and of placing our ultimate trust in a God of abundance who abandoned all security by coming among us and showing us the potential of a world in which the hungry are fed, the poor receive justice and relationships of love lie at the heart of all creation. For life, in the end, is about loving relationship – with God, with others and the creation. It is what we were made for. It's worth recalling Jesus told this parable because someone who was arguing with his brother about money had appealed to him to intervene. The parable stands as a reminder that relationship matters more.

It is sometimes said that enough is as good as a feast. The feast we have come together to share today in this Eucharist is a reminder of God's all-sufficient love, and a foretaste of the feast we will share in heaven. It is good that we have gathered, for our spiritual lives matter. That's the message of each one of our readings today, from King Solomon's words in the Book of Ecclesiastes to Paul's Letter to the Colossians. And Jesus's teaching in this part of Luke's Gospel offers the assurance that, if we look after the spiritual dimension of our inner lives, if we can learn to focus our awareness on the presence of a loving God, we will be less anxious, less preoccupied with ourselves and better able to live outwards, oriented towards God, one another and the world around us. We can choose the life of the Kingdom over our self-concern. And learn how to eat with long spoons.

Amen.