

## SUNDAY BETWEEN 31 JULY & 6 AUGUST, Year C

**Responsibility: Canon Barlow**      **Based on the Gospel for today: Luke 12:13-21]**

Jesus said: "One's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions." (Luke :15)

It seems incredible that Jesus refused to intervene in the dispute between the two brothers. Why didn't He act to right the wrong? The Law of Moses clearly laid down the procedure of inheritance, and it seems that the laws relating to inheritance had been violated. It was natural for the authority of a religious leader to be invoked in such a dispute, because the Law of Moses covered criminal, civil, ecclesiastical, and moral law - unlike our own situation where civil or State law sometimes allows things which ecclesiastical or moral law does not. One instance is the State laws recognizing and accepting so-called de facto marriage. The State has no law prohibiting adultery - the Church has. Few of the Ten Commandments are supported by civil law.

But in the first century A.D. the Law of Moses covered everything, and the rabbi was supposed to be proficient in all its aspects. Jesus declined to act as judge or arbitrator: the maintenance of justice belongs to the realm of Caesar, a realm in which there were properly constituted authorities. Jesus was concerned with the higher standards of the Kingdom of God. Law puts a restraint on sinful people, in an endeavour to make them law-abiding citizens. But it cannot make them good. On the other hand, when men and women have become good by seeking to enter the Kingdom of God and living by its moral standards and its spiritual standards, legislation about behaviour ceases to be relevant.

In this case Jesus pointed out that there could be no dispute to bring before an arbitrator if it were not for covetousness. We can't tell whether the aggrieved man was claiming what was rightly his or not, but his anxiety to get the help of the great Prophet for his own material advantage suggests an unseemly interest in money-getting. Better to be a victim of injustice, Jesus seems to be saying, than to fall into the error of thinking that abundance of life is to be found in material possessions.

Jesus then told the story of the rich man whose land produced abundant crops. He wasn't talking about a South Australian farmer obviously! His barns and silos were not big enough to store all the produce - there was no bulk transport in those days of course. So he decided to build even bigger storage facilities. Then he would relax and enjoy himself: he had enough and to spare to last him many years. "Soul," he said to himself, "you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." So he made all his plans and preparations. But he left out God. He discovered too late that material wealth is not a permanent possession. Because he had devoted all his energy to amassing property, all he had was of this world, and death disclosed his essential poverty. The only possessions worthy of man's striving for are those which death cannot take away.

It is not wealth in itself that Jesus attacks: it is the confusing of wealth with the real values of life, as though wealth is one of them, or even indeed the greatest of them. Death, in the parable as in real life, shows the folly of such a view.

The rich man was thoroughly selfish, concerned with his own wants and desires. It is all "I" - "I will do this"; "I will do that." And sadly, this is the terrible affliction which our society labours under today. Our whole world is divided into the "haves" and the "have nots", and we may be sure that if the "have nots" were suddenly turned into "haves" they would be quite as selfish in their turn.

Even on a religious level we tend to be economical in our support of those endeavouring to take the knowledge of the love of God to remote areas and to heathen societies. Many Parishes are proud of the amount of material and produce given and sent to the Church's various Social Welfare agencies: and I am not in any way decrying that. But it is cast-off clothing that we give to Thrift Shops, and produce superfluous to our own requirement. Don't get me wrong: recycling and avoidance of waste are commendable. But we should not get too flushed at the thought of our generosity - the actual cost to us is not usually very great. Generally speaking there is relatively little actual money given. That is a sweeping statement I know, and some people are very generous. But the fact remains that the Church's outreach societies are always struggling to make their budgets MEET the cost of what just must be done. The Anglican Board of Mission, the Bush Church Aid Society, the Church Missionary Society, the South American Missionary Society are all having to cut back their outreach and support because of a drying-up of the flow of generous contributions in the current economic situation. Yet most people are pretty comfortably off in spite of all the gloom and doom talk.

A few years ago billions of dollars were spent to discover that man could walk on the surface of the moon, and find that the stones there were not so different from those on earth. There were great advances made in technology and communications of course. Look at the marvels of the advances made in radio, computers, and television. But look too at the rubbish they so frequently transmit. Of course all discoveries and inventions have their down-sides: they can be, and are always misused and abused. The world possesses great resources; mankind possesses the power and capability to work marvels. The problem is how are those marvels used? In so much of his endeavours, man ruins the earth he inhabits, and the peoples who live in the places where development occurs. The problem is not one of materials or wealth or brains - it is with the human spirit and its terrible inherent selfishness. Man without God.

The two brothers squabbled about the division of their inheritance. The rich man sat back to enjoy his hoarded wealth. All forgot about God: forgot that physical life is not endless: forgot that the pursuit of selfish desires will never bring satisfaction. There is no more certain fact than that we will all die.

There is a story about three devils who were sent to earth to serve their time. Satan asked them how they proposed to win men for him. One said: "I will tell them there is no God." "That's no good," said Satan, "in their heart of hearts they know there is." The second said: "I will tell them there is no hell." Satan said: "That's worse, because men experience hell upon earth." The third said: "I will tell men that there is no hurry." And Satan said: "Go, that will bring them in by the millions."

Our life is to be given to God, lived for Him. When we leave this life the only thing we can take with us is our character, what we are. Here and now we must devote ourselves to Him; allow Him to make us what He would have us be; place our possessions and our abilities in His service.

As St. Paul wrote to the Colossians, so he might write to us: "If you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. .... put to death whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed - which is idolatry."

**AMEN**

**[Based on the Gospel for today viz. Luke 12:32-40]**

*"Be dressed for action and have your lamps lit; be like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him as soon as he comes and knocks. Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes." (Luke 12:35-37)*

This instruction to the disciples to be ready to act must have reminded them of the instruction given to the Hebrews in Egypt before the first Passover. "You shall have your belt fastened, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand." (Ex.12:11) In that situation, the people of God were to be ready to escape from their slavery: salvation was at hand and to be expected at any moment.

The emergency Jesus was speaking of was the coming of the Son of Man: "The Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour." Older translations of this passage use the phrase "Let your loins be girded" - a metaphor for readiness. When a man was about to walk briskly or run or engage in any activity it was first necessary to tuck up his long robe into his belt in readiness for immediate and energetic action. The disciples were to be like loyal servants keeping awake to open the house when their master should return from the festivities in which he was engaged. They must be sure that the decisive moment of his return doesn't catch them literally napping. The term "the coming of the Son of Man" was understood as the Day of Judgement. The disciples would understand that Jesus was warning them to be ready for that Day.

But there was a more immediate crisis for which Jesus wanted His disciples to be prepared. Jesus had been talking about trusting the Father to supply all their needs: "Therefore I tell you," He had just said, "do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat, nor about your body, what you shall put on ... Fear not little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the Kingdom." (12:22,32) The putting aside of anxiety and care does not mean lapsing into a sort of apathetic fatalism, standing aside from events with a self-righteous indifference. Christian faith is to be alert, to be ready to seize every opportunity which God provides.

Peter wanted to know whether the warning was for the disciples only or for everybody. Instead of answering with a straight "Yes" or "No", Jesus went on to answer in such a way that His warning was applicable to the situation at that time, and also applicable to us who come later. Jesus was expecting the great crisis which would result in death for Himself, a searching test for the disciples, and judgement for the nation of Israel. This, in spite of all appearances of defeat and failure, was to be the great triumph prophesied by Daniel: "I saw in the night visions, and behold, one like the Son of Man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of Days ..... and there was given to him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed." (Dan.7:13,14) All this is implied by our Lord's use of the term "Son of Man", applying it to Himself.

Whatever Jesus had to say about His return after the Resurrection, it is hardly credible that He should have required His disciples during His lifetime to be on guard night and day for something which could not happen until after His death!

If however, He Himself did not know just when to expect the final and fatal outbreak of official hostility to His ministry, it is certain that as He saw the enmity building up, He should repeatedly and earnestly warn His friends to be ready at all times for the crisis in which they themselves might well be involved, and by which Judaism would reject the Messiah for which it had looked so long.

So we have a double timescale in our Lord's warning. The first, the immediate one, was for the disciples to be ready to meet the trauma of the earthly events when the Son of Man would be arrested and crucified, and then triumph over the powers of darkness and death. The second, when the Son of Man would return in glory to take full possession of His kingdom on earth; when, as St. John the Divine saw in his vision and described in the Book of Revelation "The kingdoms of this world become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign for ever." (Rev.11:15)

This is the part of the warning that applies to us. For that time has not yet come. Though this world is part of God's creation, part of His Kingdom, it is only as well allow Him sovereignty over it. It is still part of the Kingdom of God in rebellion against its rightful King and Ruler

In time of peace it is very difficult to keep an army at fighting pitch and readiness. It is not easy to keep up a proper level of recruitment to have an effective defence force ready to meet a threat of aggression. Soldiers become bored with exercises and training when there is no threat. And governments reduce funds when the experts say no threat is observable in the foreseeable future. Yet when a situation does arise, it takes a very long time to obtain material and train personnel to meet the crisis. It is not for nothing that so much of the imagery of the Christian life is in terms of the soldier, of the life of warfare and training. The Christian is Christ's faithful "soldier and servant". He is to "fight manfully under His banner". And of course, the battle against "sin, the world, and the devil" is constantly raging around us, although too often we don't see our life in those terms.

Like a well-trained soldier; like the Israelites of the Exodus; like the slaves in the parable, we as Christians are to be ready for- the crisis, with loins girded, dressed for action, and with lamps lit. Again there is the double time scale. There is the preparedness for battling temptation, and readiness to answer the call of Christ. And there is the necessary preparedness for the coming of the Son of Man which may come in our own lifetime or it may not. Just because He has not yet come to take full possession in these last 2000 years does not mean that the Coming will not be in our own time.

We expect, don't we, that we will have some warning about our approaching death - we will have got very old and frail and know ourselves to be failing and so be properly prepared. Fatal accidents and terminal illnesses always happen to other people, not to us! "But know this," said Jesus, "if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. You also must be ready."

One final line of thought from this passage: when the master of the house came eventually and found the slaves awake and expecting him, "truly I tell you," said Jesus, " he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them."

If we are ready and expectant, Jesus will come to us, yes, and serve us! Wonderful thought! In time of sorrow and pain, He understands and comes very close to us. Or it might be on occasions of joy that He comes. He gives us of His joy: "I shall see you again and then you will be joyful, and no one shall rob you of your joy." Or He may come in judgement and forgiveness -

forgiveness we so desperately need. Or He may come in our relationships with others: as we seek to serve them, so He meets us and strengthens us and supports us. We tend to forget that Jesus described Himself as a servant, and He brings us healing, and joy, and forgiveness, and love. But only as we ourselves are faithful, ready servants.

"Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes ..... You also must be ready."

**AMEN**

**[Based upon the Gospel for today: Luke 12:49-59]**

We have just heard in the Gospel passage appointed for today, that Jesus said: "Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!" And He goes on to say how households will be divided - father against son; mother against daughter; mother-in-law against daughter-in-law, and vice versa. A very tough and even shocking thing to hear from the lips of one whom we have always thought of as gentleness personified! Furthermore, the Church, in its faithful following of the Saviour, has always been prepared to be unpopular in the eyes of the world in its insistence on the sanctity of the family and of the marriage bond. Indeed that is a major battle raging in our society today, involving such things as easily obtained divorces and abortions, of casual sexual encounters, and a general degeneration of the place a mother in the home, and the importance of family life.

So what is our Lord saying when He speaks in such strong terms? They are the more significant because they were spoken by one who loved His own family, who believed in the family, and who accepted it as a divine institution. No-one would dare drive a wedge into the family to separate its members from one another, unless to create mischief, or unless there was a higher loyalty to which even family ties must take second place. This higher loyalty Jesus recognised. Our first allegiance must be to God. It must take precedence over all lesser loyalties. Though of all earthly ties those that bind a family together come first, yet there is a divine loyalty that demands primary obedience, even at the cost of family unity and solidarity.

In this country we are not likely to be called on to make a choice between God and the family. Plenty of places in the world do create situations where a person must decide to give up his family to become a Christian. A Hindu for example would probably be disowned if he embraced Christianity. What about in Communist countries only a few years ago? Or in Germany under the Nazi regime? Here in Australia we are allowed to hold strange ideas, and generally the worst that happens is that we are considered to be peculiar. Even

such an eminent person as Sir Mark Oliphant complained some time back that "those men with their collars back to front have an obsession about the freedom of sex and aspects of social life associated with it"! Of course they have - among other things the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, as St. Paul said, and therefore not to be abused or misused. Marriage is not merely a social custom and convenience. It is as the Prayer Book says: "a gift from God for the well-being of mankind, and for the proper expression of those natural instincts and affections with which He has endowed us."

But although we are not likely to be persecuted for our Christian profession, problems do arise, even in a loving and united family. Outright opposition is usually easier to cope with than indifference. And the indifference of one's family can sap enthusiasm and dedication, where hostility would strengthen it. No-one minds another being religious, as long as he or she is not too conscientious about it. A respectable Christianity is even welcome, until its demands cease to be conventional, and it leads to an uncomfortably high standard of behaviour.

We are right to cherish our homes - and in these stressful and perplexing times they may well be our most precious possession. But peace and happiness can be bought at too high a price. For instance we

may have grown aware of new demands that our Lord is making upon us. Some of these might be quite simple, such as a desire to go to Church every Sunday instead of now and then. But we know that if we were to translate that conviction into action we should disturb the well-worn pattern of our Sundays at home, or the family's sporting activities, and because we have no desire to create a disturbance we just let it slide. This is an apparently trivial example, but it does indicate how insidious the temptation is to put the family before God.

What happens when one member of the family wants to make a sacrificial response to the needs of the Church, while the other partner is more concerned about a new car or a refrigerator? What happens when an only son, instead of going into the family business, wants to be ordained, and offers himself for the sacred ministry? Of course we want our families to be united and happy. That is right and natural. But Jesus warns us that if this is bought at the price of our convictions - if family solidarity is maintained at the cost of our loyalty to God, then we cannot be His disciples. The truly happy home is a family all of whose members are bound together in a common love and loyalty to God and to one another. This is not to say that we are to force our convictions on the rest of the family without discussion or consultation, if they do not see things our way. Nor to go off in a holier-than-thou huff if we cannot persuade them. But when all is said and done, God's claims must come first.

I do not hear aggression in our Lord's voice, only sadness when He spoke about bringing division on earth, and dividing households. He knew quite well what would happen when some accepted Him and others of the same family would not. After all, it happened in His own family: at first even His own brothers and sisters did not believe in Him. (John 7:5)

He left us in no doubt that there might be times when we would have to choose between God and family - but if the whole family is united in a desire to do God's will, such a choice is rarely likely to have to be made. In such homes there is much less chance of the pain and anguish of misunderstanding. Although the life of discipleship may lead to separation and sacrifice which will have its own grief. The grief of a mother farewelling her son, or daughter as he or she leaves for some remote mission station is nothing like that of the mother who waves goodbye and does not understand, or even want to understand why her child is behaving in what is to her a cruel and selfish manner.

This blunt and forthright statement by Jesus should urge us to take another look at our own family relationships with a critical eye. We naturally tend to accept the conventions and social standards of behaviour and morality without too much consideration. What if our desire to keep the peace in the family, or our popularity in the clubs and organisations we belong to, or our dislike of change, or our desire for social standing, have blunted the sharp edge of Christian obedience?

When, in the opening words of today's Gospel, Jesus said that He had come to cast fire upon the earth, He was using a term which everyone then recognized as meaning 'judgement' and 'testing.' And the use of the term *baptism* implied a fresh new beginning. Convinced that God's redemptive plan required Him to bring to the world the fiery baptism of judgement, He knew He would have to undergo it Himself, and He felt handicapped and restrained until that part of His mission was complete. Yet He was reluctant to bring upon the people that inevitable conflict of loyalties; to compel them to choose, once and for all, between loved ones and God's Kingdom.

We know that our Lord understood and underlined the importance of family love. But, so far as our own commitment is concerned, nothing and no one, however precious, may be allowed to impede our obedience to the Divine Will. Only so can we be His disciples. **Amen**

## **Sunday between 21 & 27 AUGUST, Year,C**

**Responsibility: Canon Barlow**

**[Based on the Epistle for today-- Hebrews 12:18-29 and also today's Gospel - Luke 13:10-17]**

"You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet , and a voice ..... But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering." (Heb.12:18,19,22)

What a marvellous contrast this morning's Epistle gives us, between the Old Covenant and the New. The Old Covenant had been made in solemn circumstances which aroused fear and awe. The New Covenant was brought about by Jesus Christ in a way which gives access to God with confidence.

In both Covenants it is the same holy God reaching down to sinful men and women and seeking to draw all members of the human race into a living relationship with Himself. The people of the Old Covenant were made to be aware of the holiness of God. They trembled when they heard God's voice like thunder on the mountains. They pleaded with Moses to speak to God for them, because they feared they would die if God Himself spoke directly to them. I suppose they knew Moses would be OK because of his call by God earlier on to be His mouthpiece.

In contrast to that Old Covenant which had been received in fear and trembling, and the observance of which had been motivated more by fear than love of God, we are called by God in the New Covenant to come into "the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem ..... to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant."

This covenant is a covenant of love, revealed through God's Son. By His perfect obedience Jesus reconciled disobedient mankind with God: through Jesus we have become the adopted children of God. As we accept this relationship with God we are to accept also the standards required by God. Just as a child adopted into a human family is expected to become such an integrated member of the family that the family's standards and way of life become his.

The Pharisees and religious leaders of Jesus day were very careful to fulfill the Commandments of the Law, and to practise the ritual regulations which had evolved since the original giving of the Law to Moses, some 1,300 years earlier. These laws governed worship, food, 2.

preparation, diet, dress, social behaviour, criminal law, and contact with others not of their race. As you have undoubtedly heard before, the Pharisees prided themselves on the way they observed every detail of the Law and its by-laws. There was nothing inherently wrong about that. But all too often the Laws were misunderstood in their basic intention, and misused as men sought to justify their own actions and their reputations. They used their scrupulous religious practices to form an elitist faction, to keep the less holy out. They fully expected that God would reward them, above all others, for what they believed to be proper and perfect behaviour in the sight of God. Those who did not conform to the Pharisee's point of view and expectations were considered to be outcasts and sinners.

It is tragic that those conscientious and zealous men, whose origins lay in a movement formed some 150 years earlier with the intention of reforming and purifying Judaism, had by the time of Jesus succumbed to the evil influence of pride and exclusiveness. That pride and self-centredness was what Jesus was constantly trying to correct in them, as they tried to show Him up as one who constantly broke

the Commandments of God. Is it any wonder that Jesus was disappointed and annoyed by the "holier-than-thou" pretentiousness of those allegedly religious people? Is it any wonder that He tangled with them on so many occasions when they set aside the needs of people for the sake of legalism?

In the action of healing the crippled woman on the Sabbath Day, Jesus clearly showed the proper priorities, how legalism must at times be set aside for the more immediate need of healing the hurting. It is not always easy to determine such priorities, and it would be possible to get into the habit of setting aside traditional laws and practices under the pretext of helping people. Keeping holy the Sabbath - or in our later situation, the day of worship, the weekly commemoration of the Resurrection - is important. It is the day when we consciously put God first and gather with others of like mind to worship Him, hear His Word, gain spiritual nourishment. And only the most vital of other demands should be allowed to take precedence.

The episode of the crippled woman has much in common with earlier controversies about the Sabbath. Jesus is accused of breaking the Law by healing on the Sabbath. Elsewhere we read of Him accused of breaking the Sabbath because He allowed His disciples to pluck and eat grains of cereal as they walked. This was reaping and winnowing grain - yes it was rather petty, but it was all part of the anti-Jesus movement, to discredit Him. On that occasion Jesus said: "The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath; so the Son of man is lord even of the sabbath." (Mark 2:27) On this occasion His reply was that since the Law allowed a man to provide for his domestic animals on the Sabbath, it is inconsistent to be more merciful to a beast than to a fellow human being.

But there is also a new note in Jesus' answer - it was necessary that this woman be loosed from her ailment on the Sabbath. Jesus was acting in obedience to a necessity which takes precedence over all other obligations, including the Sabbath law. The kingdom of God has broken in upon the kingdom of Satan, and the work of liberating the victims of Satan's tyranny must go on seven days a week. Far from being the wrong day, the Sabbath was actually the best day for such works of mercy. To liberate men and women from the reign of Satan and to bring them under the gracious reign of God was therefore to fulfill the purpose of the Sabbath, not to profane it.

God, in the person of Jesus Christ, invites men and women to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to join with innumerable angels in festal gathering, as the Epistle puts it.

However the only way to respond to His invitation is by the acknowledgement that we have not earned claim or merit of our own efforts. Salvation is God's unearned, unmerited gift to us and we must not assume that we will get the best seats in heaven by good behaviour, or strenuous spiritual exercises or striving to keep every jot and tittle of the Law. We will want to live better lives, and worship more readily, as we know ourselves to be adopted as children of the Heavenly Father. But they follow, not precede the knowledge of our salvation. It was a lesson the Pharisees found difficult to learn, as indeed do many of us.

The Christian religion is based on love, the infinite love of God for mankind. As we reflect upon these things we need to bear in mind the important distinction between trying to live a holy life in order to reach God, and living a holy life because in God's sight we have already been healed and cleansed in Christ, and made holy. **AMEN**