

Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost Year C – 26th September 2010

Sometimes the future can look gloomy. There are times when the future can look pretty grim. We say ‘there is no future for us’. We can fear lack of financial security, or fear for the future prosperity of children; we can fear old age and approaching frailty, or fear death itself. Is there any personal future for me and my family? At times we may doubt whether God exists, and then if he does exist whether he is loving and just. How do we live our lives under these circumstances? ‘Grant us, in all our doubts and uncertainties, the grace to ask what you would have us do’. (Collect) The readings today point to a few answers.

Be hopeful, remembering God’s promises: When Jerusalem was being besieged by the Babylonians, things were pretty grim for Jeremiah who himself was under guard. His nation and his family appeared to have no future. God gave them a sign of hope. This land would be Israel’s again and Jeremiah’s inheritance was secure. (Jeremiah 32. 1-3a, 6-15) Jeremiah believed and bought land.

Keep your eye on eternal life, not just on making yourself prosperous in this life. 1 Tim 6.6-19 urges us to pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. And, if we are rich, then we are not to set our hopes on wealth but on God. The rich have particular responsibilities to be good, to share, to be generous and to do good works with their money. And this is the problem of the rich man in the parable (Luke 16. 19-31). He lived under the impression that this life is the only one and so he spent his wealth on self-indulgence, what’s more, he failed to use it for someone in need right under his nose.

God gives us a future. This principle is the guiding light to how we live our lives today. Know there is a future life, prepare for the future; don’t put your trust in your achievements and possessions in this life, but put your trust in God; use your wealth, not on self-indulgence, but for the good of others. Knowing God’s goodness and believing in the future, ‘we may see light’ and in his ‘narrow path may not stumble.’ (Collect)

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost Year C – 5th September 2010

Those who enjoy life in the presence of God (those who sit down at the messianic banquet—see Luke 14.1-24)) will be those who depend on God’s grace and are open and loving in their service of others. The outcasts of society will have a greater claim on God’s love than those who are self-righteous for they know they depend on grace for survival, having no merit in the eyes of others. Fittingly, the banquet parables end with teaching about the cost of discipleship. (Luke 14.25-35)

Discipleship is costly and demands sacrifice. To be a true follower of Jesus one must learn to put obedience of God before our own personal desires. Jesus’ words seem harsh but love of God comes first and then the rest follows. Augustine said, ‘Love God and do as you please’ (for it will please you then to love others) Jesus tells two parables to illustrate the truth about the costliness of our decisions (perhaps towers and wars don’t mean much to us today but we might talk of building a house or suing someone for damages). Discipleship is a serious business. Put God first, follow Jesus’ way, You need to be totally committed and it might cost you something!

Total commitment is an act of humility. It is allowing ourselves to be shaped like clay in the potter’s hands. (Jeremiah 18.1-11 speaking about his relationship to Israel uses this simile). For becoming a disciple is an act of transformation where old attitudes, old behaviours, old understandings of self are put aside and we become new creatures in Christ. The letter to Philemon is a concrete example of this from the first century. Onesimus, a runaway slave had become a Christian with Paul’s influence. Paul did not criticize slavery but begged for transformation of the relationship between master and slave, requesting that Onesimus be treated with brotherly love. What humility and hospitality, what changed behaviour this required from Philemon! What cost, but look at the gain! **Individually and corporately** we Christians are called to this same transformation of old attitudes to humble discipleship, becoming like clay in the Potter’s hands, to be shaped into Christ-like vessels to bring Christ’s life to others. Isn’t the cost worth the reward?

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost Year C – 12th September 2010

Paul thought of himself as the ‘chief of sinners’ because he had been a zealous persecutor of the Church, who used violence against Christians and blasphemy against Christ. In his mind there was none worse. For him then, as an outstanding example of one who was ‘lost’, his salvation by Christ was totally undeserved. “The grace of the Lord overflowed for [him] with the faith and love that are in Lord Jesus.” Paul shows us in this testament of his salvation what the atonement means. (1 Timothy).

Atonement and salvation are the theme of the two parables of the lost. (Luke 15.1-10). Salvation is the work of God. It is God who seeks us out to bring us home to him. It is God’s action, not ours. At first sight, the two parables appear to be simple parables to support the social behaviour of Jesus in reaching out in friendship to the tax collectors and sinners who were unwelcome in Jewish society. But they are more than that. The shepherd initiates the action in bringing the sheep back to the fold. He restores to wholeness and perfection. The fold is incomplete if even one is lost. The dowry set of coins is incomplete if one is missing. Here is a search for completeness and wholeness, not found until there is restoration of the lost one. Individuals suffer from lack of wholeness through imperfection, through deliberate action, through straying from the path God laid out for them. Humanity suffers from so many things which keep us apart from God and each other. God in Christ has initiated the action to bring us to wholeness, to restore us to perfection, to bring us to the Father and the right relationship with him.

The atonement is not the human act of a son appeasing an angry father but God’s gift to us doing what we could not do for ourselves. Christ is the presence of God in man for us, seeking and saving the lost. It is God’s initiative and our response to that gracious, undeserved action which leads to restoration. “When we were still far off you met us in your Son and brought us home” are the much-loved words of the post-communion prayer which expresses this truth so well.

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost Year C – 19th September 2010

We can find the parables hard to understand. We know the Lord’s disciples found them hard to understand and the gospel today shows that the gospel writer and the early Christian community may have found them difficult too. Luke 16.1-13 is a complex passage.

The parable of the unjust steward (Luke 16.1-8) appears to be concerned with teaching about worldly wealth, especially in light of the several sayings attached to it in verses 9-13; but really it’s a parable about judgment. The steward is a rogue and he is faced with the natural consequences of his deceit: loss of job, no prospects for future employment, social embarrassment. He must act quickly to save his situation. In doing so, he shows he is pretty shrewd: the manager has retrieved some of the money, the debtors have reduced their debts, and the steward has redeemed himself a little in his eyes. Is Jesus praising a self-interested business man? Far from it, the point comes ‘the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light’. It’s a criticism of many religious people who, when confronted with critical situations do nothing; it is not Jesus’ commendation of rogue business practices!

It’s a parable for today. Internationally it could be applied to our lack of action in places of severe drought and famine, and our stewardship of the earth’s resources; nationally, to Australia’s neglect of its Aboriginal people; in the church to our unwillingness to witness to the gospel; individually to our own poor discipleship, to our lack of personal responsibility when confronted with personal need or situations of unfairness. And so on. Our ‘rogue’ behaviour in all these things has natural consequences. Where do we need to act quickly to overcome our lack of proper response to the world around us? How can we avoid the judgment that is inevitable if we fail to see what we must do now?

Can this be applied to some aspect of mission locally? How can we be better stewards of the gifts God has given us and the tasks entrusted to us? Examine the natural consequences of present lack of vision, ministry or commitment. What would it be ‘shrewd’ to do?