

Trinity 9, 2010

Hosea 11:1-11; Colossians 3:1-11

Twente & Nijmegen

Luke 12:13-21

The Christian's New Clothes

I understand that during the interregnum – the period between chaplains – just before I got here 5 years ago, there was a locum priest named Paul Faint who was here during Lent (2005?). Apparently, he did a fascinating Lent course in the East Netherlands on the 7 deadly sins. It's gotten such good reviews, I'm sorry I missed it!

The 7 traditional deadly sins are a compelling subject, partly because, even though the official list dates back to Pope Gregory the Great's 6th C papacy, the 7 deadlies have sadly never become obsolete. We still struggle with them today.

The 4th C Egyptian monk Evagrius probably invented the list, but had 8 sins or vices. In addition to pride, gluttony, envy, lust, avarice, anger, and [spiritual] sloth, Evagrius added another interestingly very modern vice: sadness. We need to be pastorally careful how we think about the 7 deadly sins, how they come about and how they are dealt with. Sin itself means missing the mark, failing to aim and reach the right goal, not just doing bad things. So it is remarkable that a 4th C monk might have anticipated the tragedy of psychological depression, I think.

Anyway, Evagrius' disciple John Cassian carried the list to the West and there Pope Gregory adopted and adapted it, dropping sadness, but retaining the other 7, and making Pride the cardinal sin. Indeed, Gregory put pride in a category by itself. I can see why.

Today we look briefly at avarice, otherwise known as greed. We looked at greed in June, too, I realize. Of the 7 deadlies, greed comes up again and again, I am afraid, partly because Jesus talks about it so much. Money, we've noted before, is Jesus' favorite teaching point, aside from the subject of God himself.

One might well wonder why Jesus harps on about money and desire

for it and other worldly goods so much. We often think we live in a materialistic age, but our ancestors weren't that morally superior apparently. Greed and love of money and objects is a perpetual problem for us humans.

Mark Twain, always good for a quotable quote or two, said this: 'Few of us can stand prosperity. Another man's I mean!'

And yet money and the ways of wealth fascinate us. So we have glossy magazines and TV shows devoted to following (and intruding on) the lives of the rich and famous. So paparazzi chase the rich and famous sometimes to their wits end and sometimes even to life's end, in the tragic case of the Princess of Wales.

Avarice or greed has little to do with how much money you have. Whether one is rich, poor, or middle class, one can be greedy. Greediness is not about what you have it is about what you want. And ironically, the hallmark of greed is the inability to enjoy what you do have.

That is Ebenezer Scrooge's problem just as much as it is the problem of the rich man in Jesus' parable. Neither enjoyed their wealth and achievements: they were too preoccupied with acquiring more, more, more. 'Counting', says Os Guinness, 'is the image of greed, the picture of the miser fondling his gold' without enjoying it or giving any away. And being counted is perhaps the modern shift in thinking, as people want to make the Forbes 50, or Fortune 500 or equivalent.

Too late did the rich man of Jesus' parable discover that 'one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions' (Lk 12:25). Fortunately Charles Dickens gave Scrooge a happy ending: he repented just in time!

If 'one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions', then it must consist in something else, something more important, more enduring, more life-giving, in Christ's view. The clues are to be found in looking to heaven, rather than looking at the world around us and its worldliness.

Put differently, if we share in the resurrection of Christ, then our hearts, minds and tastes are to be lifted up, too, from the pits of the world, to heavenly places.

3:¹ So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ²Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, ³for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

Let us not be tied down by the world's ways, possessed by possessions. As Paul put it in Colossians chapter 1 (which we read on July 11th):
¹¹May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from [God's] glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully ¹²giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. ¹³He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, ¹⁴in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.'

Like professional footballers, we have been taken from one team, the bad one, and transferred to the good one. And we get new clothes:
⁹Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices ¹⁰and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator.'
Since God in heaven, and not things on earth, is the source of our power, it pays (in the eternal, not monetary sense) to look up to Him and His ways.

You know Hans Christian Andersen fable about the Emperor's New Clothes? A vain and style-conscious ruler is tricked by some crafty tailors into parading before his subjects wearing the latest fashion they've invented. A child in the crowd yells out the truth: the Emperor has nothing on! That was the naked truth!

Well the Gospel and Epistle tell us the dark truth about greed and worldliness. But they also point to hope. A Christian has New Clothes

of lasting and real value. Paul suggests we cast off the worldly, materialistic old garments, and be clothed with power from on high, in Christ and his new life. Amen.